

AN:...shut up. I was bored and this is what happened, okay? I don't know if many people will like this but i am finding it entertaining to write so that's all that really matters to me. Besides, it gives me something to do and helps me think up ideas for my other fics so NO COMPLAINTS!

See chapter 3 for an explanation on the Dark Jewels Trilogy. Contains spoilers but if you don't want to read the series then it'll give you enough information.

Chapter#1

He would have been happy to stay up in his room and not ruin their perfect little evening supper. Unfortunately for him it seemed that Dudley had taken a liking to the daughter of their new neighbours and they needed their 'delinquent' nephew present so that they could emphasize how wonderful their son was. He had yet to see the female that had caught his cousin's attention but he was told repeatedly that a girl like her wouldn't like the company of someone like him and to make sure he kept his distance.

He wasn't sure who his cousin was friends with anymore. He certainly kept his little gang away from Harry, in any case. That was a good thing because it gave Harry plenty of time to expend his own fury at his relatives in a safer way that wouldn't get him locked in his room for the summer. Not that they could actually keep him locked up but it made them feel better to send him to his room and have the door firmly shut.

It was another source of annoyance for him. For weeks now, ever since the school year had ended, he had felt a presence that had eluded him. Whatever it was it had been putting his nerves on edge and making him rather hostile toward anything that was provoking him - no matter how trivial. He had thus far been able to reign in his growing temper and had been expending it on early morning runs and other physical activity that seemed to take the bite of the urges away.

Harry was still reluctant to be forced into such a situation as a formal dinner while under the explicit instructions that he was to be sure that Dudley was the most appealing male in the room. His uncle wasn't

aware of these instructions though as his aunt had also forbid him from mentioning them. She had informed him that she was perfectly aware that her son wasn't the most attractive boy but that she wouldn't have her scrawny, scruff-haired nephew ruining her Diddykins special night. He had relented and she had been content enough to ignore him up until the night of the dinner.

So as such, he was stuck in clothing two sizes too big and entirely black. His aunt Petunia had at least made sure that the clothes were presentable and had only bothered glaring at his unruly hair for a minute or two at the most. His Uncle Vernon had been perfectly happy to ignore his very existence while he gave Dudley 'helpful' pointers on women. Harry thought the very idea that his Uncle Vernon had flirted with his aunt to be utterly horrifying and so stayed very far away from Dudley's room while the discussion was going on. He had settled on sitting in the back garden and away from his relative's preparations for the soon-to-arrive guests.

Ding Dong! He heard the doorbell and knew his relatives were still being fussed over by Petunia and sighed when he heard her voice snap at him. "Get the door and get out of the way!"

He reached the door and opened it, keeping his face carefully neutral (as ordered) as he asked them politely to come in and watched the nondescript couple walk in. They had perfectly common brown hair and eyes and wore normal clothing in varying shades of brown and other neutral tones. He figured that their daughter would be just as normal (a thing that would have no doubt been attractive to Dudley, considering his fear of anything abnormal).

That was why what he was faced with was so beautifully terrifying.

Her hair was a pale white-gold colour and she had it cut short (even shorter than his) and had spiked it in a rather uncaring style that he was sure would make his aunt's skin crawl. Her eyes were icy blue and she was most definitely not dressed like her parents. She wore whitewashed jeans and comfortable looking white shoes with flat soles. Clinging to her slender upper curves, which he did not think came from her plumper mother and father, was a silvery camisole over which she had donned a light-blue jacket he suspected was

made of some light and airy cotton. Hanging on a plain metal chain around her neck was a strange black jewel that caught his attention almost right away.

She paused in the threshold and regarded him. Her head tilted slightly to one side before she smiled at him. Both of her parent's coats were hanging over his arm (he had been told to take their coats like a good little nephew) and he wasn't certain if he should take her light covering or not.

"Would you please take my coat or show me where to put it?" Something in her voice whispered of an order and while he would normally balk and bristle at such a thing coming from his relatives he didn't seem to mind when it came from her. Something about her request made his tense and annoyed last nerves come back under his control for the first time that summer.

"I'll take it." She gave it to him and he quickly went to put them up in the guest room. When he returned to the base of the stairs, she was no longer there. He shuffled toward the living room and immediately spotted her. She was sitting in one of the armchairs and was surveying the chatting adults confidently while rolling her eyes every now and then in boredom. Something about her bearing whispered of a strength he couldn't see in her slender frame and he studied her unabashedly while he still had the chance.

Her gaze flickered up at his arrival and a slow grin worked its way onto her lips. Dudley - who had previously been attempting to talk to her (with much stuttering) - followed her line of sight when the unexpected reaction blossomed to life. His face paled and then he narrowed his piggy eyes and cleared his throat rather noisily - attracting the attention of the adults.

Both his aunt and uncle made disgusted faces while their guests were occupied with examining him. The female spoke first in a low throaty voice that was coated with amusement. "Hello. I don't believe we've been introduced." Her eyes flashed to his relatives briefly in question before her attention was centred on him once more. In turn, Harry did not remove his gaze from hers and instead met it head-on.

He felt something flow through his veins and soothe the tense fury that threatened to bubble to the surface.

"That is our nephew Harry." His uncle's voice was decidedly angry and resentful but Harry didn't particularly care at the moment. "Don't pay him much attention, my dear, he only just got back from St. Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurable Criminal Boys."

"Oh?" The new woman eyed him warily but her daughter's grin only widened into something more amused than curious.

"Hello Harry. I'm Kirra." She got to her feet and crossed the room seemingly oblivious to her parent's worried and annoyed looks. She held out her hand and he brought his own up after disregarding his cousin and uncle's dirty look. They shook and Harry found himself unexplainably pleased at the firm pressure she exerted against his hand. He pulled his hand from hers first and something appreciative flickered in her icy eyes.

"Pleased to meet you," he replied carefully. She grinned wickedly and turned to her parents.

"Might I be able to join Harry - and Dudley if he wants to come - on a tour of the neighbourhood?" Harry was almost certain she wasn't actually planning on following their decision. He was also certain from the resentment in their gaze that she had been given similar instructions on behaviour before she had arrived that he had been given. Judging by her tone, she had only even bothered including Dudley out of politeness.

"I don't think that to be quite a safe idea . . . " Her father spoke first.

"Thank you father." She ignored him and smiled candidly at Harry. "Let's go."

He kept the grin off his face and motioned that she follow him. She did so without complaint and gave Dudley only a mildly annoyed look when he got up to waddle after them. The moment they had left the house she turned to him with a delighted smirk. "So Harry how come I haven't seen you around campus?"

He furrowed his brow in confusion and felt his anger rising when he failed to comprehend what she meant. "Excuse me?"

"St. Brutus's," she prompted. "I'm there all the time visiting my cousin and my cousin knows everyone and everyone knows him. He hasn't mentioned you at all. And I don't recognize you from any of the yearbook pictures; you look about the same age . . . " She frowned and slowly dragged her gaze up and down the length of his body in a perfectly measured pace. He squirmed uncomfortably at the sensation of having a female look at him like that and waited for her to speak. "How old are you?"

"I'm fifteen," he informed her.

"As am I!" Dudley butted in.

Neither of the males had been aware that she had begun to walk and had only instinctively followed at her motion. He wasn't quite sure when they'd arrived at the park - only that they had. Kirra gave Dudley a scathing look. "I didn't ask you." Dudley silenced immediately. Harry was silently impressed at the female's level of control over the male and smirked slightly. He wondered what exactly it was that made Dudley keep returning to this particular female if she was the type of girl that his pudgy cousin would see as horrifying.

He'd probably only seen her from afar up until tonight. Harry mused. He felt the strange contented sensation settle in his stomach and promptly ignored the feeling.

She flashed a grin that seemed entirely too feral for her features. "Where do you really go to school Harry?"

The presence of being watched annoyed him and he growled softly as it increased. Her gaze sharpened and she snapped her head up. "What's that?" she demanded. "Do you feel that?"

"I might." He avoided the question as their little trio unconsciously began to head in the direction of the disturbance. Dudley hung back

but when Kirra showed no inclination to stay nearby he hurried after them as fast as his wide girth would allow.

Night had fallen only a short time ago, the sun had been setting when Kirra and her parents had arrived, and he was almost certain that the female was not afraid of the dark. She certainly seemed quite comfortable but then again she was sticking close to him. He spared her a glance and she caught it before he had the chance to tear his eyes away. A wicked smirk blossomed to life on her lips. "Afraid of the dark, are you, Harry?" she teased.

Now he was certain she was fine. "Not in the least. Are you?" She scoffed in reply.

She had easily moved to the front of their little party and led them down a narrow alley Harry remembered having first glimpsed Sirius at. She entered and frowned, peering up and around into the dark. "The hell..." The blackness washed over them like a sudden crashing wave and was accompanied by a blistering cold that sent chills up and down his spine. He couldn't see a thing in the onslaught of black but he groped about for Kirra and (although he really didn't care) his cousin.

"What are you d-doing?" Dudley gave a muted shriek. "S-stop it!"

"He isn't doing anything you twit!" Kirra snapped impatiently but her voice trembled at the cold. "Shut up and don't move!"

"Do as she says Dudley," Harry warned him. He felt Kirra brush against his arm - felt the silkiness of her shirt.

"I'll t-tell dad!" his cousin threatened. Harry strained to hear and tried to open his eyes to their fullest. Whispers floated in the dark and he felt the sinking sensation of realization kick in.

"Shit..."

"W-where are you? W-what are y-you d-doi..."

"Shut up! I'm trying to hear!" Harry snapped. He felt Kirra shift away from him and grabbed her before she got too far. "Stay close," he ordered.

"I can take care of myself." Her voice was stern and low. Dangerous. He bristled at the tone and gripped her arm harder.

"You don't know what we're up against. I do."

"I know perfectly well what we're up against Mr. Potter." And then she was gone from his grasp.

The silence stretched and he heard them: the long rattling breaths and the icy chill that permeated the air to the bone. He felt the jolt of dread strike him in the gut and wondered how exactly Kirra knew his last name and just how much else she might know.

In any case he felt his cousin barrel past him in an attempt to escape and he was knocked to the side. He heard Kirra scream in frustration as she grunted at some impact. He bet that Dudley had shoved her too.

"DUDLEY COME BACK! YOU'RE RUNNING RIGHT AT IT!" He heard Dudley's squealing yell and then heard his footsteps stop. He heard Kirra shout profanities and then she, too, was silent.

A horrible creeping chill from behind him led to only one other conclusion. There was more than one.

"CLOSE YOUR MOUTHS! WHATEVER YOU DO KEEP YOUR MOUTHS SHUT!" he yelled while he grappled for his wand on the ground where it had fallen when Dudley shoved him aside. "Wand! Lumos!" His wand tip ignited and he grabbed it, climbing to his feet quickly and whirling to face the towering hooded figure as it glided toward them.

He scanned for a happy memory and after finding one he thought adequate he shouted out his defence. "Expecto patronum!" A bit of silvery mist erupted from his wand and he snarled in anger as the

voices of his memories grew louder. A new memory - something happier "Expecto patronum!" More mist.

He felt his strength draining away. Felt his happiness leaving; felt his power fading. The voices were loudest now but his thoughts were still running rampant in an attempt to save him. Something brushed against his mind and pictures of his friends sprung up. He gathered his strength and latched tightly to the thought of their faces. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" A huge silvery stag burst forth and plowed down the offending Dementor "This way!" he called to it, waving down the alley. "Dudley? DUDLEY!"

"Well I certainly feel loved." Kirra stumbled away from where she had propped herself up against the wall of a building. The stag cantered past her as Harry paused to help while yelling his last command.

"GET IT!"

He heard the shrieks of the Dementors as they were driven away by his conjured defence. "After all that work I did saving your cousin too." She motioned to the prone form of his cousin and glowered at him in tired amusement as though the whole incident hadn't happened. "Those must have at least had the power of the Red... certainly nothing I couldn't handle but there were quite a few of them." She gave him a wry sideways look. "Nice work on the Patronus, by the way."

Something approached and they could both sense it. They both snapped around to stare at the sight of Harry's batty old neighbour Mrs. Figg come running up with her shopping bag swinging from her wrist and her house slippers still on her feet. Harry made to stow his wand away quickly but she shrieked at him first.

"Don't put it away, idiot boy! What if there are more of them around? Oh, I'm going to kill Mundungus Fletcher!"

Harry watched Kirra wrinkle her brow and frown in the direction of her house. "I'm not going to go explain this to them," she informed him while heaving Dudley along on one side back to number four. Harry grunted in response before he managed to find the breath to respond.

"It won't be any better here."

"Better then trying to lie to my parents." She fixed him with a look. "They aren't aware of magic; at least your relatives know about it."

"Your funeral..." he growled softly and together they managed to haul Dudley up the stairs and into the house. He glanced sideways at his cousin as his aunt opened the door and began to wail at her son's condition. "Duck!" He let his cousin go and Kirra sprang back as Dudley lurched and then vomited in the hall.

His uncle stormed into the hall and helped Petunia to manoeuver Dudley into the house while avoiding stepping in the pool of puke. "He's ill, Vernon!" Harry's aunt whined pitifully. Tears leaked from her eyes at the sorry sight of her son.

Kirra made a face at the scent and sight of the puke and then shared a look with Harry. "Get me away from that."

He was only too happy to oblige. They tried to escape upstairs together before any attention was drawn to them but his Uncle Vernon's voice stopped him dead in his tracks.

"BOY, COME HERE!" Harry growled softly and winced at the tone. Kirra shot a dark glare in the direction of the kitchen and then glanced sharply at him when he complied.

"You aren't seriously obeying that male are you?" she demanded furiously. "Why would you do a thing like that? You certainly don't have to!"

"Unfortunately I do," he muttered back viciously. She snarled at him - actually snarled - and he paused to pin her with a glare. "What else could I do?"

"Refuse!"

"And get in trouble? No thanks."

She snarled again and smothered a scream before storming into the kitchen without further word to him. She entered and Harry's relatives were surprised to see the daughter of their previous guests (who had left after assuring their neighbours that Kirra would be fine) glare so furiously at all of them. She whirled to Dudley first and fixed her gaze on his slumped-over, sickly-green, form. "You: stay quiet and don't you dare speak a word until I say so." Dudley quivered and shrunk in his seat. "Harry, get in here and explain."

Harry entered now and sighed as his uncle began to make demands. "What have you done to my son?"

"I didn't do anything."

"LIES!"

"What was it darling? Did he do... you-know-what? Did he use his t-thing?" Petunia was kneeling by her son and asking him her questions while shooting dark looks at Harry and his still-visible wand.

Dudley nodded.

"Oh you little..." Kirra made as though to physically harm Harry's cousin but she tempered herself and instead clenched and unclenched her fists restlessly. "If you weren't so stupid you would know that Harry only used his wand to save you!" She pointedly ignored that she had done the saving in that respect and Harry caught the glint in her eyes when she next looked at him that said 'you-owe-me-one'.

Vernon prepared to start yelling again but was interrupted by an owl sweeping in and dropping a letter at Harry's feet before sweeping out, brushing its feathers across Vernon's head and narrowly missing his aunt's spotless refrigerator with its trailing claws.

"OWLS!" Vernon bellowed. "OWLS AGAIN! I WILL NOT HAVE OWLS IN MY HOUSE!"

Kirra stared after the path the owl had taken and then turned to face Harry. He was reading the letter she knew was from the ministry and

when he was finished he looked up with a determined but grim expression. She narrowed her eyes and dove into his mind, brushing aside the weak shields. Her eyes widened and she snapped back to her own head. "I forbid it," she told him firmly. Icy eyes sharpened to keep him rooted to his spot. "Don't you dare even think about it. The ministry doesn't have that kind of power, I know."

He searched her gaze and relented reluctantly. "Apparently I've been expelled. But Kirra doesn't seem to think that the ministry is allowed to do that."

"Expelled? For what?" Vernon demanded, latching only onto the first part of the information.

"For doing magic outside of school," Harry replied shortly, knowing the conclusion his uncle would make.

"Then you admit it! You did do something!"

"He preformed the Patronus charm to save your son from Dementors," Kirra informed him with forced politeness. "It's a bit of magic that is absolutely harmless to landens, er, muggles... non-magic people." She fumbled a bit with the terminology and eventually shrugged indifferently.

"Just what is a Dementy - a dem... a..."

"Dementors. They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban." The entire room turned and stared in utter disbelief at Petunia Dursley as she clamped a hand over her mouth at the statement. Her eyes widened to the size of saucers and she looked pleadingly at her husband for him to understand. "She talked about them all the time with him."

A second owl swooped in, followed by a third and then a fourth, all of them made a beeline for Harry and dropped their letters at his feet or allowed him to snatch it from them while they circled back around and out of the house. Vernon threw a small fit and slammed the windows shut while muttering about 'enough - effing - owls'.

Harry read all of them in rapid succession and then looked up. Kirra eyed the seals used and then sighed. "A hearing?" she questioned softly. He nodded. "That can't be good..."

"Well?" His Uncle Vernon piped up eagerly, now that Kirra had her say. "What now? Have they sentenced you to anything? Do you lot have the death penalty?" The last was a rather hopeful sounding afterthought.

Kirra snorted softly as though the very idea were insane. "I highly doubt they could even attempt such a thing against him." She jerked her chin in Harry's direction. "Only a - " She snapped her mouth shut. "You know what? Never mind."

"I've got to go to a hearing," he repeated for his uncle.

"And they'll sentence you there?"

"I suppose."

"I won't give up hope then," his uncle said nastily.

"I'd suggest the opposite." Kirra spoke but her voice was not her normal tone. It was deep and dark like midnight and full of untamable fury that was being held back by little more than a veneer of civilization. Harry started at the sound of it and stared as she bared her teeth in a feral grin that made his relatives wince.

He didn't remember much of what happened after that. It was as though something had lifted the fog he wasn't aware of from around his mind. All he was aware of was the strange tugging sensation that was burning all his other instincts into nothing and the deep midnight voice of his new neighbour - of her icy eyes, pale hair and apparent connection to the magical world and most importantly of the soft dark power he could feel soothing him whenever she was near.

"We're going out," his uncle informed him curtly.

"Sorry?"

"We - that is to say, your aunt, Dudley and I - are going out."

"Fine," Harry replied dully, returning to staring at his bedroom ceiling.

"You are not to leave your bedroom while we are away."

"OK."

"You are not to touch the television, the stereo, or any of our possessions."

"Right."

"You are not to steal food from the fridge."

Harry shot him an only slightly annoyed look out of the corner of his eye. "OK."

"I am going to lock your door."

"You do that."

His uncle glared, clearly suspicious of the lack of argument, but left without another word anyways. Harry heard the click of the lock, the slamming of car doors and the start of the engine before he knew his relatives were gone. He rolled over onto his stomach to try and ease the rather unsettling feeling in the pit of his belly. It had been causing him discomfort for much of the time since the Dementor attack on his cousin and his neighbour.

But that was four days ago.

He glanced out the window to Kirra's house. He could see her front-facing bedroom window was wide open in the pleasant evening and he could clearly see her form silhouetted against the light shining by her bed. She was sitting on the incline of the roof (the window was her obvious entryway to her current spot) and reading a thick book. He wasn't sure what book exactly and he couldn't make out her features well enough to tell if she was enjoying it or not. Whatever the case, she had looked up to watch his relatives leave before she looked at the house and then returned to her book.

He had left his window open as well, waiting for the blessed time when Hedwig would return. The fact that it allowed him to keep an eye on his strangest and newest neighbour had nothing to do with it - at least that's what he told himself.

A crash came from the kitchen and the stirring in his belly immediately set his instincts on to full alert. Whatever it was, it was an intruder and it should be destroyed - that was what his instincts were screaming at him. He felt a soothing power calm his temper and accepted it gratefully for it helped to clear his mind enough to think clearly.

There was a tense moment of silence and Harry took the time to grab his wand and stare at the door. He felt the power that was keeping him calm flicker and the door swung open suddenly, startling him. He warily crept to the head of the stairs and stared down at the eight or nine figures silhouetted against the light streaming in from the glass door.

"Lower your wand, boy, before you take someone's eye out," said a low growling voice.

Harry hesitated at the familiar - but not - voice but he did not lower his wand. "Professor Moody?" he asked. He was surprised at the hint of snarl that made his voice deeper than it normally was. The power that was still soothing him thrummed contentedly.

"Don't know much about 'Professor', never got round to much teaching, did I?" the voice growled softly. "Get down here, we want to see you properly."

Harry lowered his wand but did not relax his grip on it, nor did he move. There was a tugging presence in his mind that urged him not to lose the dangerous edge, however small the presence seemed to think it was at the moment. Harry agreed with the presence; he didn't, after all, have very many good reasons to trust Moody. The one he had thought was on his side turned out to be just one of Voldemort's henchmen and he hadn't seen much of the real Moody to know

whether or not this one was the real one. The presence kindly informed him that his distrust was justified.

"It's all right, Harry. We've come to take you away." Harry knew this voice and his heart leapt to his throat at the sound of it. Though he hadn't heard it for over a year, he would never forget the voice of his old Professor.

"Professor Lupin?" The snarl that was underlying his voice lessened but was still clearly present. "Is that you?"

The presence in his mind retreated but the soothing power went with it and Harry felt his temper at the intrusion rise again and struggled to keep it down.

"Why are we all standing in the dark?" asked a third, female, voice. "Lumos!"

The group was illuminated and Harry regarded them warily. Remus Lupin was nearest him, standing alongside the youngest of the bunch: the female who held her wand-tip alight. "Oooh, he looks just like I thought he would," said the witch delightedly, peering up at him from beneath short, spiky, violent purple locks of hair. "Wotcher, Harry!"

Harry's temper softened in the face of the witch. He felt the presence return in his mind and it seemed almost... jealous? He frowned slightly and turned to look behind him. He was surprised at what he was faced with. Kirra stood there, glowering down at the group. Her gaze turned to Harry and he blinked in surprise while the adults stiffened and drew wands. "Hold on, she's fine," he warned them off with more growl than was necessary lining his voice. She seemed pleased at the response and offered him a smile.

"Your window was open and I felt their presences from my roof. Not to mention I saw their brooms." Her lips quirked in a smirk.

"Kirra... it was rather dangerous to enter here when you knew other wizards were here."

"Good thing Moody knew it was me then." She tossed her head to one side rather arrogantly and smirked at the male with the magical eye. "Evening Mad-Eye."

"What are you doing here?" he grunted viciously. "Meddling again?"

"I don't meddle." She sniffed delicately as though insulted. "And before you come up with some ridiculous test to be sure that he is the real Harry, I'll just tell you that he is indeed the actual thing. You can fool a wizard but you can't fool a witch." She winked at Harry before smiling brightly at Moody's sulky disposition. "Psychic scent checks out."

"Alright, fine then," he grunted. "If you're all set to take another wizard..." His eye spun wildly in all directions. "None of those infernal beasties of yours around, are there?"

She smirked wryly. "No. None that would want to pounce you, in any case."

"Good." He grunted in satisfaction.

Kirra stepped lightly down the steps and Harry followed. Moody's acceptance of the female made the rest relax around her. The entire group congregated in the kitchen where Moody had already taken a seat at the kitchen table and was swigging from his hip flask as his magical eye went spinning in all directions.

"This is Alastor Moody, Harry," Lupin introduced with a soft smile.

"Ya, I know." He shifted uncomfortably at being introduced to someone he'd thought he'd known for a year.

"This is Nymphadora -"

"Don't call me Nymphadora, Remus." The young witch shuddered in disgust. "It's Tonks."

"Nymphadora Tonks who prefers to be called by her surname," Remus repeated and then finished in a tone that suggested the whole idea was ridiculous.

"So would you if your fool of a mother called you Nymphadora," she muttered darkly. Kirra smiled widely at the comment.

"A sensible witch, then," she complimented.

"And this is Kingsley Shacklebolt." Remus continued the introductions with the tall black male who bowed in response. Kirra's gaze flickered to him appreciatively. "Elphias Doge. Dedalus Diggle -"

"We've met before," the excitable male squeaked and dropped his hat at both Harry and Kirra whose smiles only widened at the acknowledgement.

"Emmeline Vance. Sturgis Podmore and Hestia Jones," he finished quickly.

Harry inclined his head to each and shifted under their gazes. His instincts were still warring with him between trusting them or destroying them. Kirra stepped forward and the instincts increased until she spoke in her midnight voice.

"As Moody and Dedalus are the only ones who have ever met me I suppose I should introduce myself." She bowed with a flourish. "Kirra S.D., though my parents will try and tell you differently."

"With good reason too," Moody growled. She just smiled at him.

TBC...

AN: well gee, i certainly feel loved. glares. fine, i get the picture. You'll read it but you won't review...lol just kiddin, don't worry. Neways i have a new chap done and i'm part way through the third. for anyone who's reading this please review cause i'm starting to feel neglected...sniff.

(Insert disclaimer here) btw, the 'Dark Jewels Trilogy' is written by Anne Bishop. Good series. I highly reccomend it.

Chapter#2

"Er - yeah," Harry looked at Remus, "Look - what's going on, I haven't heard anything from anyone, what's Vol - ?"

"Shut up!" Moody growled as several of the assembled wizards and witches made odd hissing sounds. "We're not discussing it here, it's too risky." Moody turned his normal eye on Harry but his magical one remained trained on the ceiling. "Damn it!" He reached up and yanked it out angrily. "It keeps getting stuck - ever since that scum wore it."

"Mad-Eye, you do know that's disgusting, don't you?" asked Tonks conversationally.

"Get me a glass of water, would you, Harry," Moody asked. Kirra waved a hand dismissively and a glass of water appeared in mid-air. Harry started at the blatant use of magic - especially when he couldn't see a wand - but Moody acted as though he was perfectly used to such a thing. "Didn't know your name was Harry, Kirra," he muttered in amusement as he dropped the eye into the glass. He prodded it up and down and it stared at each of them in turn.

"Didn't know you trusted things that I call in." She raised a brow as Moody snorted.

"I know not to trust things your brother calls in, or your uncle, or your cousin, or your father...or when you call in anything you might have inherited from either of your mothers. Things you call in, I can trust." He glowered. "You'd never take away from their opportunities to meddle."

She grinned widely. "Fair enough. So how are you getting - wherever you're going?"

"Brooms," said Lupin. "Only way. You're too young to Apparate and they'll be watching the Floo Network and there's no way we can set up an unauthorized Portkey."

"Remus says you're a good flier," Kingsley Shacklebolt commented.

"He's excellent." Lupin was checking his watch and only answered absently. "Anyway, you'd better go and get packed, Harry, we want to be ready to go when the signal comes."

"I'll come and help you!" Tonks volunteered brightly. Kirra's gaze narrowed.

"I'm coming too," she declared.

They walked back up the stairs. Tonks looked around with much interest and curiosity. "Funny place," she commented. "It's a bit too clean, d'you know what I mean? Bit unnatural. Oh, this is better," she exclaimed when they entered Harry's room. He had been confined to it for four days and had taken out much of his anger on his belongings.

Kirra looked around in sudden interest. "So this is what you've been doing these past few days... Can't say I'm very impressed but, then again, I've done worse myself."

Harry looked up sharply. "Why would you have done worse?" He was angry again.

She smiled at him. "The males in my family are very... male." She shrugged. "My aunt always complains about how fussy my uncle gets and she's told me tons of stories about when they first met and when she got pregnant with my cousin. Believe me, it's a pain to try and deal with my cousin ever since my uncle started training him."

Harry bristled at the thought of males but squashed the feeling ruthlessly.

"I thought we had to pack?"

"Oh!" Tonks started from where she had been facing the mirror with new bubble-gum pink hair. Harry quirked a brow at it. "I'm a Metamorphmagus. It means I can change my appearance at will." She added at his confused expression.

"I'm no good at packing," Kirra informed them. "I could vanish these things in an instant but I don't think that's exactly what Moody and them want..."

"Alright then!" Tonks exclaimed cheerfully. "It'll be much quicker if I - pack!" she cried. Everything on the floor was swept into the air and was then flung messily into the trunk. "I'm not very good at it." She commented while peering at the pile. "Oh well." She shrugged and then looked at Hedwig's cage. "Scourgify!"

"Well that's a bit better anyways..." Kirra commented optimistically. "What we need is a hearth witch - or Mrs. Beale from the Hall... she'd know what to do."

Harry and Tinks looked at her strangely as a wistful expression appeared on her face. With a shrug each they finished packing Harry's things and returned to the kitchen. Kirra followed after them, muttering things about her surroundings.

"You know, I think your aunt might have a bit of Blood in her... it would most certainly explain her insatiable cleaning habits..."

"We don't have a broom for you and there are no landing webs near headquarters," Moody informed her the moment they had entered the kitchen. Kirra huffed softly and shot over a dirty look.

"50 Galleons says I beat you there." She held out her hand and a velvet bag appeared in her hand. "Care for the wager Mad-Eye?"

"I'll take you up on that." They both shook and then promptly handed their money to Kingsley. He cocked a brow at them but took the money.

"Why me?"

"Because you are a gentleman and won't lose my money," Kirra informed him. "I'll just be on my way now then..." and without so much as another word - Harry didn't even take his eyes off of her - she vanished.

Harry had decided that whatever it was that was ruling his emotions so much that he was exploding at his friends, he was going to find out. But first he had to figure out why it was that Kirra was quite suddenly in the front hall wrestling alongside a dark-haired man and Professor Lupin to get a set of curtains shut over the screeching painting.

"Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh!" The woman depicted was screaming.

"I said - shut - UP!" roared the man. With a last surge of power and a shrill string of profanities from the female, the curtains were shut and the hall was silenced.

Harry stared as Kirra smirked at him tiredly. "You're a hard one to follow Harry. I had to ride the Grey to get here first."

"The...what?"

The dark-haired male coughed and drew Harry's attention quickly. "Well, right. I see you've met, at least. I don't think I want to know how but I'm sure that won't stop you from telling me will it Kirra?"

"Course not," she replied promptly and rather too cheerfully. "I shut the hag up for you last time and I highly doubt you'll find someone able to do it a second."

Sirius grunted in response. "Hello Harry," he greeted. "See you've met my mother." He nodded to the painting and then promptly whirled after making a slicing beckoning gesture. "Let's leave before she wakes up again."

Kirra bristled and fell into step behind Sirius but alongside Harry. "I'd like to see him weave a web strong enough to silence that old crone. I have half a mind to make it so she'll never shut up, when he gets in these moods."

"Heard that."

"You were supposed to," she snapped. She huffed softly and glanced at Harry. "Why does he have to be such a male?"

Harry quirked a brow as she began to mutter some rather creative curses about his godfather - most of them coming back to him being male, a subject of much annoyance judging by the tone she used to emphasize it - but still managed to keep up. He wasn't given much more chance to speak with her because she swept away the moment they entered the basement kitchen.

"Sit down, Harry. You've met Mundungus, haven't you?" Sirius asked as he gestured for Harry to take a seat.

"Some'n say m'name?" The vaguely human-shaped pile of rags mumbled sleepily. "I 'gree with Sirius..."

Someone - Harry thought it was Ginny - giggled.

"The meeting's over Dung." Sirius grinned slightly. "Harry's arrived."

"Eh? Blimey, so 'e 'as. Yeah... you all right, 'Arry?" He blinked blearily and peered across at Harry through his matted ginger hair.

"Yeah," said Harry.

Mundungus groped through his pockets, searching for something while trying to keep his gaze on Harry. Kirra glanced over at the man and snorted softly. "Inside pocket Dung," she informed him.

"Wha... oh here it is." He drew a grimy black pipe and ignited the end of it with his wand - an equally grimy thing it was - and took a deep pull on it. Great billowing clouds of greenish smoke obscured his

figure in seconds and made the room stink acridly of burning socks. "Owe you a 'pology," he grunted from within his cloud of smoke.

"For that last time, Mundungus," Mrs. Weasley snapped. "Do not smoke that thing in the kitchen, especially not when we are about to eat!"

"Ah. Right. Sorry, Molly." He stowed the thing back in his pockets with a fearful glance over at the woman. The cloud of smoke vanished with the disappearance of the pipe.

The woman eyed him shrewdly for a moment longer before she set about working in her kitchen again. Kirra smiled candidly at Mundungus who shot her a glare when she smothered a giggle.

"Could'a warned me," he grunted.

"Could've, would've, didn't," she chirped.

"What can I do, Molly?" Tonks asked as she bounded forwards enthusiastically. Mrs. Weasley hesitated apprehensively.

"Er - no, it's all right, Tonks. You've done enough for today."

"No, no, I want to help!" Tonks said brightly as she moved forwards to help. Mrs. Weasley narrowed her eyes as Tonks went to help set the table but otherwise made no comment. She supervised the making of the supper while the rest who weren't helping spoke.

"Why aren't you out there helping, Kirra?" Sirius asked the female snidely. She shot him a dark look.

"I will not be the one to intrude upon a hearth witch's kitchen. That's just inviting trouble." She looked away dismissively. "A Summer-Sky can manage her own kitchen without the help of a Black."

Molly Weasley looked up at the mention and beamed at Kirra. "I always love it when you help out, Kirra you know that. I wouldn't mind it if you intruded."

Kirra smiled back. "No need to try and include me. You know how helpless I am at cooking." Her smile turned wistful and propped her chin up with her hand. "Please, continue."

As soon as Molly had returned to her cooking, Kirra looked back at the males nearby. "Only a hearth witch, I tell you, could find making this place fit for human habitation fun."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"No one's lived here for ten years, not since my dear mother died, unless you count her old house-elf, and he's gone round the twist - hasn't cleaned anything in ages." Sirius gestured to the dismal kitchen by waving his hand around.

"Fred - George - NO, JUST CARRY THEM!" Molly shrieked.

Mundungus, Sirius, Harry and a rather amused Kirra all looked up and then promptly leapt back from the table. Fred and George had apparently bewitched a large cauldron of stew, an iron flagon of Butterbeer and a heavy wooden breadboard, complete with knife, to sail through the air towards them. They skidded the length of the table, burning it and spilling everywhere - the knife landed upright precisely where Sirius's hand had been not a moment before.

"FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE!" Mrs. Weasley screamed, waving her arms wildly to encompass the disaster before her. "THERE WAS NO NEED - I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS - JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE ALLOWED TO USE MAGIC NOW, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WHIP YOUR WANDS OUT FOR EVERY TINY LITTLE THING!"

"We were just trying to save a bit of time!" Fred protested while yanking the knife out of the wood. Kirra clamped a hand over her mouth to smother her laughter. "Sorry, Sirius, mate - didn't mean to -"

Harry and his godfather were laughing, as was Kirra, but Mundungus was swearing as he tried to get up and remove a frightened Crookshanks from his chest where he had latched onto when he had fallen from Sirius's lap.

Molly stared at Kirra in bewilderment as the girl got up and patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Don't worry Mrs. Weasley, no harm done. Just ignore them; they were only being male." Mrs. Weasley's lips quivered into a small smile. "See? I wouldn't worry. Besides, males are allowed to have their moments of stupidity as long as they do as they're told the rest of the time."

"Oh fine." The older woman glared at her sons. "But if they do it again..."

"Then rip them a new one." Kirra smirked wickedly. "Or else we could always make them drink Gravediggers and not give them a brew in the morning."

"After their last escapade with those I think that might just be a good idea." Mrs. Weasley sniffed while her sons paled.

"We won't do it again, promise!" they pleaded of their mother, getting onto their knees dramatically (but not without good reason).

"See that you don't," she snapped at them. "Now sit down and eat." Kirra shot a dark glare at the curtains. Ask her to weave a web around curtains to make a painting shut up: fine; ask her to destroy the curtains: fine; ask her to change their colour: fine; but asking her to clean curtains...

"I can't do this," she informed Mrs. Weasley while eyeing the curtains in distaste. "If you want me to destroy them, I won't have a problem. I just can't clean them."

Mrs. Weasley furrowed her brow. "I thought you'd say that. It's just that I couldn't manage it with the Summer-Sky and I really didn't want to have to do it the wizard way..." She sighed. "Oh well. It can't be helped."

"Jewels can't do everything in this realm and I really don't have time to make a gate or find a Dark Altar or anything of the sort to head home and ask for help... you're lucky that we had enough ingredients here to have your Birthright Ceremony and make your Offering." Kirra stared at the curtains for a moment longer and then turned to Mrs.

Weasley again. "If a hearth witch can't manage it then we'll have to do it the wizard way."

"Pity. It would be so much cleaner to do it with Jewels..."

"Cover your faces and take a spray," Mrs. Weasley ordered while handing out rags for masks like the one she was currently wearing. "It's Doxycide. I've never seen an infestation this bad - what that house-elf's been doing for the last ten years -"

Hermione threw a reproachful look at Mrs. Weasley. "Kreacher's really old, he probably couldn't manage -"

"You'd be surprised what Kreacher can manage when he wants to, Hermione." Sirius entered the room with a thoroughly disgruntled Kirra in tow. She dropped the blood-stained bag of dead rats on a chair almost immediately and threw Sirius a furious look.

"I offered to weave a compulsion spell but you said no, so don't start on that again," she snapped. "Males! If they aren't fussing or petting, they're complaining."

"Witches! If they aren't meddling, they're bitching," Sirius spat back. Kirra's eyes darkened in rage and Harry found himself inexplicably irritated with his godfather. Kirra and Sirius stared at each other for some time before Kirra began to laugh.

"All right so perhaps you don't always complain. But I am right about the petting and fussing."

"As long as you acknowledge that my complaining is only because Dumbledore refuses to let me ask for your help." The two shook hands and Kirra gave Sirius a strange look.

"Wait a sec... what authority is Dumbledore using that's making you not let me help? What good is a Warlord if he can't serve?" Her frown deepened.

"He's a very powerful wizard." He ruffled her hair affectionately. "Even you wouldn't stand up to him."

"I would!" she argued.

"Even when you know he walks the border of the Twisted Kingdom while still staying sane?" He raised a brow skeptically.

She hesitated then grouchyly snatched a spray bottle of Doxycide and a mask. "...". She shot him one last glare before she went to join the Doxy party. "I'll get you back for that comment," she threatened.

Harry was passing through the hall on his way to his and Ron's room when he heard a soft exclamation and a loud bang come from the twin's room. This in itself wasn't anything unusual but the feminine figure that stumbled out of the room was. Kirra glowered darkly into the room and opened her mouth to shout. "I told you not to touch that! But did you listen? No..."

"Kirra?"

Her head snapped to the side and she brightened. "Harry! How are you?"

"Fine... what are you doing...?"

"Oh that?" She shoved the twins into the room when they tried to escape the billowing blue smoke. "Helping them." She slammed the door and promptly stepped back, shooting it a last glare. The twins banged against the door trying to get out but soon all sounds from within stopped. "I've Black-locked the room!" she informed the closed door. "So don't even try!"

Harry raised a brow and then frowned at the closed door. "You've what-locked the room?"

"Black-locked." She looked at him sideways. "You don't know about the Jewels? I would've thought you'd had your Birthright Ceremony already... you certainly are old enough."

"Kirra!" Molly Weasley had appeared in the hall and was frowning at the younger girl. "He doesn't need to know about that."

Kirra glared. "Of course he does. He's a Warlord Prince. They need Protocol and service to keep everyone else safe."

"A Warlord?" Mrs. Weasley paled.

"A Warlord Prince," Kirra corrected patiently. "And most likely a strong one at that. I wouldn't be surprised if he wore Birthright Red."

"Red...?" she murmured faintly. "Red? But even Dumbledore only wore the red after his..." She shook.

Kirra nodded in satisfaction. "Right then. Harry, come with me. I've got something to show you. And it's a good thing I packed the proper materials too..." Harry followed the female when she started down the hall and then down the stairs. She paused at a door and pressed her hand to it. The black jewelled ring on her hand caught what little light there was and flashed as she opened the door. Inside, spread across a frame sitting on a spindly legged table, was a web. Kirra walked towards this and waved a hand quickly. The black candles sprang to life and illuminated the strange circle on the floor and Harry jumped in surprise.

"Sit," she commanded. "You will let a drop of your blood be spilled onto each of those points there," she pointed, "when I leave, mind you. Your mind will travel to the Abyss and I want you to go down as deep as you can. There will be a lot of pressure pushing against you - trying to break your Inner Core - but just keep going until you feel you can't go any deeper. When that happens just..." She paused and shook her head. "You'll know what to do when that happens."

"Wait what...?" He didn't get a chance to ask any more questions because she had shut and locked the door.

He sighed and turned back to the web and stared at it. It looked rather plain but there were small flecks of light that the thread seemed to have captured. All of it was rather messy and wild and did not look a thing like what Harry knew a spider's web would look like. With a soft sigh he approached the web.

Laying before it was a finely honed dagger and he picked it up, pricking his finger and letting the blood well. He let a drop fall in each of the places that Kirra had indicated.

Something powerful swept through him. His eyes widened as he was plunged into darkness.

His time in the black abyss seemed to stretch for an eternity and he could hardly remember a thing of it. He knew he had gone down, passing various coloured rings until he had been unable to dive any deeper. He wasn't sure where he was when he'd stopped but he had begun to weave a web using the broken fragments from the ones he had crashed through to reach his current position. It had taken a while to strengthen the web he sat on but when he had finished and allowed the abyss to crash in on him he had known it was over.

He had opened his eyes and was surprised to find two glimmering jewels sitting innocently in the web, ensnared and supported by the faintly glimmering threads of spidersilk. Harry frowned as something tugged at him to take the jewels. He did and then rolled them in his hands as he examined the uncut stone.

They were both deep blue in color and he continued to stare at them curiously. Until the door opened. Kirra entered the room, skirting the circle on the floor and pulling Sirius along behind her insistently. "You're his godfather and you will claim him."

"Wait, what? When was this decided? Wouldn't one of your family be a better choice...?" Sirius looked distinctly uncomfortable but also...proud?

Kirra gave him a glare so withering Harry could see his godfather shrink down and nod. With a satisfied nod Kirra turned to Harry and made a gesture to halt his approach. "Kneel," she commanded. He kneeled with a concerned glance to Sirius. The dark-haired male made a brief motion to tell him not to question the girl. "Repeat everything I say, got it?" When he nodded the affirmative she began to recite, "I swear to follow the code of the Blood and to follow Protocol. I will serve my family, under Lord Sirius Black. This I swear."

Harry repeated the words dutifully and rose when she made a quick gesture. He didn't move after that because she quickly began to speak again. "Do any challenge this? No? Okay, Harry you can leave the circle." He did and felt a strange tingling run through his body. Kirra stared at him suspiciously for a time before she brightened and lunged.

He caught her the moment her arms wound around his neck. Something inside him hummed contentedly at the contact and then whined softly when she withdrew to beam at him. "Birthright Sapphire!" she squealed. "I have to tell Molly!" She darted out of the room without another word.

Harry looked to his godfather curiously. The older man just shook his head and grinned. "She's done that to everyone strong enough to wear Jewels. I swear she's got a stash of webs and candles somewhere..." He smiled. "Ah well, welcome to the Earth Blood, Harry." He clapped his hand on Harry's shoulder and left the room. Harry stared after him and then down to the two deep blue stones in his hands, thoroughly confused.

"I'll have to take him to meet papa and grandpapa and uncle!" a female voice declared firmly. "They'll teach him quick enough and of course he'll have to visit the Hall..." Her voice was excited at first but now trailed off with a strange note. "If he can manage to learn the basics here first of course... wouldn't want him to go unprepared to meet the boyos..."

Harry entered the room and instantly, without so much as a warning from his own instincts, his entire focus sharpened to the proximity of his old DADA teacher, Remus Lupin, and the strange girl Kirra. He prowled over and dropped to a seat beside her, staring warily across the table at the older man. Remus raised a brow and then shared a look with Kirra. Harry bristled internally and tried to squash the rising instinct to get Kirra away from Remus. The older male glanced over once more and chuckled softly before he stood. "Good luck with your new endeavour, my dear. I am certain you'll be needing it." Kirra scowled at him.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Remus. I'll be sure to bring that Escort next time!" She leaned back on the hind legs of her chair in

order to pitch her voice after the man as he exited the basement kitchen. Laughter was the only response she received. "Males," she growled in annoyance and promptly returned her attention to Harry. "May I help you?"

Harry dropped the two blue jewels onto the table and pointed. "Explain."

She eyed them carefully. "Those are your Birthright Jewels. Once you are able to use their power properly we can have them set. You'll probably be able to get a necklace, a ring and some other interesting fixings for your wand or something out of the two of them." Her eyes flickered up to his, full of wary amusement. "Is something wrong?"

He felt his frustration rise. "What exactly do you mean Birthright Jewels? What are they for?"

She considered him with a blank expression as she stood. Finally she gave a content smile. "After your hearing, I'll explain everything. For now, just relax; keep those someplace safe and..." A flicker of wary-caution and seriousness appeared and made her smile falter ever so slightly. "Try and keep close to Mrs. Weasley or to Hedwig. It'll be good for you."

He tried to question her further but she vanished. Just like that, she was gone without so much as a POP! or other sound like that of apparating. Harry snarled softly in frustration.

Jewels

White
Yellow
Tiger Eye
Rose
Summer-Sky
Purple Dusk
Opal
Green
Sapphire
Red
Grey
Ebon-Grey
Black

Opal is the dividing line between lighter and darker Jewels because it can be either

When making an Offering to the Darkness, a person can descend a maximum of three ranks from his/her Birthright Jewel
ex. Birthright White could descend to Rose

Blood Hierarchy/Castes

Males:

landen - non-Blood of any race

Blood male - a general term for males of the Blood; also refers to any Blood male who doesn't wear the Jewels

Warlord - a Jeweled male equal in status to a witch

Prince - a Jewels male equal in status to a Priestess or a Healer

Warlord Prince - a dangerous, extremely aggressive Jeweled male; in status, slightly lower than a Queen

Females:

landen - see above

Blood female - a general term for all females of the Blood; mostly refers to any Blood female who doesn't wear Jewels

witch - a Blood female who wears Jewels but isn't one of the other hierarchical levels; also refers to any Jeweled female

Healer - a witch who heals physical wounds and illnesses; equal in status to a Priestess and a Prince

Priestess - a witch who care for altars, Sanctuaries and Dark Altars; witnesses handfasts and marriages; performs offerings; equal in status to a Healer and a Prince

Black Widow - a witch who heals the mind; weaves the tangled webs of dreams and visions; is trained in illusions and poisons

Queen - a witch who rules the Blood; is considered to be the land's hear and the Blood's moral centre; as such, she is the focal point of their society

The Realms

Terreille - a Realm previously ruled by self-made High Priestess, Dorothea SaDiablo: a Priestess who ruined the Realm by enslaving the males and having them break all potential Queens and strong Queens who already ruled. To 'break' a witch is to take away their ability to wear the Jewels and, in effect, sending them over the border into the Twisted Kingdom (the name for when a witch goes insane; they see things in shades of grey and - depending on how far into the Twisted Kingdom they wander - speak in riddles; often loose touch with reality and forget to eat or who people are). Currently Terreille is recovering from Witch's purge of the Blood in all the Realms.

Kaeleer (the Shadow Realm) - home of SaDiablo Hall (the original Hall; there is one in Terreille and Hell as well). It has fought with Terreille in the past and won just barely. It tried to remain separate from Dorothea's growing taint and almost failed. Witch made her Offering to the Darkness and became Queen of Ebon Askavi. All the Territory Queens and their respective Warlord Princes entered into Witch's court - giving her control over the entire Realm.

Ebon Askavi (aka. the Black Mountain, the Keep) - It is Present in all the Realms and is the centre of the Winds (a spider-webbing of power that the Blood may use to travel through the Realm though it cannot be used to jump between Realms; a Dark Altar is necessary to travel between the Realms: there are thirteen in total). This is the home of Witch.

Hell (the Dark Realm, the Realm of the Dead) - ruled by Saetan SaDiablo. The Realm where the demon-dead (Blood who were too strong to fade into the Darkness) live. The forever twilight realm. Also home to the cildru dyathe (Blood children too strong to fade into the Darkness).

About the Blood

Witch (aka. Jaenelle Angelline/SaDiablo) - born as Jaenelle Angelline but adopted by Saetan Sadiablo after she was lost to the Abyss for two years. Witch is the centre of Blood society - above even the Queens. She is Dreams Made Flesh. Jaenelle Angelline is the result of centuries of dreaming from various races and the Kindred and is the strongest Witch to ever walk the realms. Each year at Winsol the Blood dance to the glory of Witch. Before Witch purged the Blood she wore the Ebony Jewel which takes 72 hours for her to gather all of her power while the Black only takes a few minutes. Is a Black Widow/Healer/Queen. After the Purge she wore the Twilight's Dawn - a one-of-a-kind Jewel gifted to her personally by Lorn.

Birthright Jewels - the first Jewel the Blood receive after their Birthright Ceremony where paternity is formally acknowledged. No one knows where the Jewels come from, only that they appear at the end. It is now known that the Jewels are actually scales off of Lorn, the Prince of the Dragons.

Offering to the Darkness - after the Blood reach their age of majority they undergo a Ceremony in which they receive new Jewels as befitting of their full power. Once again, no one knows where the new Jewels appear from. Takes from sunset to sunrise for all Jewel ranks. Only Witch took three full-days.

Territory Queens/Province Queens/District Queens - these Queens are the rulers of their respective Territories and answer to no one. Below a Territory Queen are Province Queens (kind of like Dukes to a King) and below Province Queens are District Queens (like Lords to a Duke). There was only one instance where Territory Queens have ever yielded to another - the case of Witch when she took the place as Queen of Kaeleer.

Kindred - animals who are also able to wear the Jewels. They hold their own Territories but previous to Jaenelle Angelline they were not recognized as members of the Blood. When Jaenelle became Queen of Ebon Askavi and then of Kaeleer it was only to save the Kindred who were being slaughtered when their Territories were being handed out to new immigrants to Kaeleer. Jaenelle never wanted to rule or have a court but she did so to save the Kindred.

The Dark Council - set in place by Saetan SaDiablo. They take care of anything that the Territory Queens in Kaeleer cannot settle on their own. Responsible for well-being of entire Realm (AN: and a right pain in the ass they are; sticking their noses where it doesn't belong).

Brief Summary of Characters

Saetan SaDiablo - High Lord of Hell, Prince of the Darkness, Warlord Prince of Dhemlan, and previously Steward of the Dark Court at Ebon Askavi. Father of Daemon SaDiablo and Lucivar Yaslana. Adoptive father of Jaenelle Angelline. The first male in the history of the Blood to wear the Black and, previous to his son Daemon, the only male Black Widow. Well over 50000 years in age. He is a Guardian - one of the living dead who straddles the line between the living and the demon-dead and, as such, is beyond both.

Daemon SaDiablo - Previously Consort of the Dark Court at Ebon Askavi. Now husband to Jaenelle. He is the son of Saetan and brother to Lucivar. A Warlord Prince who wears the Black and a natural Black Widow. Was a pleasure slave for the majority of his some 1700 years.

Lucivar Yaslana - an Eyrien Warlord Prince with a temper in excess even for a Warlord Prince. Son of Saetan and brother to Daemon. Though Jaenelle is his adoptive sister she is not the sister of his brother Daemon (who is her husband). Eyrien people have huge wings akin to a bats (but stronger, obviously). He is married to Marian - a Purple Dusk hearth witch - and together they have a son named Daemonar (after his brother who was still wandering the Twisted Kingdom at the time).

Draca - the Keep's Seneschal and previously a dragon. Now she retains a rather reptilian appearance. She was the one who gifted the Blood with their power eons before.

Geoffrey - the Keep's historian and Librarian. The last of his race - which he refuses to name - and a Guardian. He is in charge of the register where all the Blood are listed.

Ladvarian - Kindred. A Sceltie puppy who is also a Warlord. The rest of the Kindred respect him for his knowledge about humans and non-kindred and was the one who organized the Kindred to help hold onto the Living Dream Witch when her survival was threatened in her purging of the Realms. Best friends with Kaelas.

Kaelas - Kindred. An Arcerian Warlord Prince who wears the Red. Because of a quirk in his training he is able to get through shields of any rank - even those darker than his own. If you want an estimate of his size, he weighs around eight-hundred pounds. White in color and the author of this fanfic assumes he bears resemblance to a sabre-tooth cat. Best friends with Ladvarian.

KaeAskavi - son of Kaelas and a Warlord Prince. It is unknown what Jewel he wears (AN: and so I get to decide!). In his younger years he was friends with a young Glacian-girl named Della.

Daemonar - Son of Lucivar. Was a terror as a child. Warlord Prince. (AN: as we really don't see much of him I don't have anything else to say).

Karla - a Black Widow/Healer/Queen/ Queen of Glacia. An outspoken witch with a wicked sense of humour and temper. Lost the use of her legs due to an attempt on her life with very strong poison. Showed no interest in males, sexually, due to attempts on her by her twisted Uncle. Does not mind the males who served in the Dark Court but it was unlikely that she would ever settle down and find one for herself, despite her friend's getting married (and some of them pregnant!).

AN: any other characters not mentioned above are of my own creation. If I happen to put in more characters from the 'Black Jewels Trilogy' I will inform you and put a brief summary in my opening notes.

AN2: it should be known that there are 3 long-lived races. The Eyriens are one of those races. The Dhemlan are also one. I'm not quite sure of the third but I'm certain about the Eyriens and almost-certain about the Dhemlans.

Chapter#3

Kirra hummed softly to herself. He was the first Warlord Prince she had found on Earth so far and he wore Birthright Sapphire. This new Realm had powerful dreamers for not realizing their heritage. The basic Craft they used was referred to as simply 'magic' but it had changed over the years into something entirely different. It wasn't entirely unwelcomed but she did feel the need to awaken the ones with the most Blood in them and let them realize their birthright. She wasn't doing so bad, she thought. Certainly, her first appearance in the Realm had cause many of the Blood that existed to have impromptu Birthright Ceremonies and a fair many were not ones she, herself, would have chosen. But it didn't really matter as none of them (save the one that really mattered) had received any knowledge on how to use the power they were given.

Others, like Molly Weasley, had needed her to awaken their dormant power. Even fewer, like Harry Potter, had begun to realize new instincts they hadn't had before and were becoming frustrated with themselves. She was helping them but it was difficult without having a dominate male who could teach them. She had brought some of her family and friends over from their homes to her new Realm but the Earth Blood weren't ready to be introduced - let alone trained - by them yet. She didn't worry so much about the older Blood, it was the young ones she fretted. Especially the Warlord Princes. If they were allowed to mature without learning Protocol... well it would be disastrous if any of them wore dark jewels; she was just happy she had reached Harry - who wore Birthright Sapphire - in a sufficient amount of time.

Unluckily, it now fell on her how to explain to his Headmaster that she was going to be abducting his most precious student and taking him to a Realm with far more dangerous and dark males than he had ever even seen.

Her mood darkened and she huffed in exhaustion. How her mama had ever managed things like this was beyond her. But she was grateful that at least none of her family could go there on their own. That Realm was hers and it was up to her to set it straight.

Of course, that sounded far more impressive in her head than it did when she had first told her cousin the same. He had laughed so hard she had to stuff his food with Pickleberries and then plea with her uncle to whomp his ass in sticks. Failing to achieve the second of that, she had informed her papa of the situation and he had told her mama who had...taken care of it. Then her grandpapa had taken care of the mess that had ensued from that.

All in all it was a rather amusing reminiscence that achieved its goal of cheering her up.

"Kirra?" She yelped and immediately the offending person was flung back. She chanced a look over and gasped.

"Oh - Daemonar - crap, I'm sorry!" He shook his wings out and tucked them against his body while grinning at her ruefully.

"I shouldn't have snuck up on you. So..." he trailed off and gave her a wicked look while tucking her firmly against him with one arm. "Hows this new Realm of yours?" She narrowed her eyes.

"You aren't coming." He pouted but the wicked glimmer still played in his golden eyes. "No, Daemonar."

"He certainly isn't but I just might if you don't fess up," the male voice rang out and Kirra turned to face it. The male had dark-gold hair and smouldering green-gold eyes. He wore a black tunic and moved with a feline's grace. When he finally stopped he was towering over the small female. She glared at him and he gave a slow smile. "Please?"

"Fine. I found my first Warlord Prince. We had his Birthright Ceremony. He wears the Sapphire." The male narrowed his eyes dangerously.

"A Warlord Prince?" His voice was low and deadly calm.

"Yes Lucien, a Warlord Prince." She huffed in annoyed amusement. "He's got to go to a hearing for using magic in front of muggles - er landens," She scowled at the terminology, "and then I'll bring him here for a crash-course, okay?" The male gave a content smile that

still held the hint of possessive snarl and kissed her cheek affectionately.

"Of course little one."

"I'm certain you weren't excluding me on purpose," Daemonar sniffed, rustling his wings noisily in indignation.

Kirra grinned wickedly. "Who said that?" She yelped and darted away when he lunged. Lucien grinned widely as a chase ensued that ended up with Kirra slung over the shoulder of her cousin and pounding on his back while shrieking angrily, "Let me DOWN! I'll tell papa!" Her cousin snorted. "I'll tell mama!" At this her cousin paled and promptly dropped her. She stopped two inches from the ground and then shot up to stand at his height on air. "Damn you Daemonar!"

"Feisty little witch, isn't she?" Daemonar smirked at Lucien who tried to keep the amused grin down while under the glare of his little sister. "Definitely takes after Karla."

"I'd say she takes after the whole Coven," Lucien commented while the female fumed. "But we wouldn't want her any other way." With that last comment he reached out and tugged her to his chest for a hug. "We've missed you little one."

"Well I didn't miss you!"

"Grandpapa!" Saetan resisted the urge to wince as his granddaughter's voice rang clear through the Keep. Geoffrey smiled faintly and caught his eye. Both men stayed quiet, hoping they wouldn't be found, but to no avail. "Grandpapa!" The little blonde witch flung herself into her grandfather's arms with a delighted little squeal.

"Kirra, I didn't know you were coming home." He hugged the female and she nodded into his shoulder.

"I wasn't going to but I felt bad for leaving Daemonar and Lucien so I decided to come back for a visit. Besides," she added cheerfully, "KaeAskavi must be getting bored now that Della's gotten married."

"Ah yes, of course, the little Brother." He smiled at her wryly as she beamed. "We wouldn't want him to get bored, it would be Kaelas all over again."

"What's wrong with Kaelas?" she demanded, her smile turning to a frown as her head tilted to one side. "He's perfectly fine with me and mama."

Yes, well that's you and Jaenelle now isn't it? Saetan thought dryly. Outwardly he just gave her a secretive smile that she shrugged off dismissively. "How long will you be staying this time?"

"Not long." She bit her lip hesitantly. "Grandpapa?"

"Yes?" he prompted gently.

"While I was on Earth I found... well I found a Warlord Prince." She looked at him shrewdly to gauge his reaction. He kept his face perfectly neutral. "His name is Harry and he's... kinda like the wizarding world's saviour. Voldemort, that one wizard I told you about, tried to kill him when he was a baby but he couldn't do it and he vanished for about ten years. He's back now - I've told you that too - and well..."

"You were wondering how you could take their hero from them when they need him so badly," Saetan finished for her. She nodded and peered up at him for an answer. "Well little one, I think that it would be better for everyone if you brought him here for formal training. If he doesn't learn about his heritage as one of the Blood it could be disastrous for him later on." She nodded thoughtfully and Saetan wondered at the excited look in her eyes. "Little one, what is his Birthright Jewel?"

"The Sapphire," she chirped cheerfully. "Isn't it wonderful? The strongest male I've found so far was a Red Jeweled Prince - and that's after his Offering - and he's really too old to reach his full potential than if we had found him as a child."

Saetan shared a look with Geoffrey who gave a soft frown as the young female continued to speak of her latest 'finds'. She was a

Queen who had shown a strong inclination to being a Black Widow and had started formal training only recently. Sometimes Saetan found her puzzling over healing spells in the Keep's library but she wasn't the natural Healer her mother was, though she had decided to take up formal training as a healer as well - saying it was best to be prepared for anything. Perhaps that was why she pestered the Keep's Seneschal, Draca, to teach her how to open all the Gates in all the Realms (a smart move since Draca was the only person who would be perfectly educated on how each Gate opened and was the only one he would trust the training of his granddaughter to).

"...Grandpapa? Are you listening?" Her voice broke into his thoughts.

He fixed his gaze back on hers and was relieved to see that she didn't wear her 'Queen stare' - as most males referred to all similar looks as. That was the stare that no male in his right mind would argue with or try to deceive. Instead she wore the look that always reminded him of a wolf pup puzzling over why it couldn't see the fawn its nose said was right in front of it.

"I'm sorry little one, I must have drifted off." She nodded in acceptance of this answer.

"I'll come by for a visit later, after I've visited KaeAskavi and Shadow." Shadow was, of course, a black wolf who was also a Purple-Dusk Warlord Prince who had recently come away from his Offering wearing the Green. He was fiercely devoted to Kirra and had decided that the only acceptable male company the young Queen could have were himself, KaeAskavi and Kaelas, Ladvarian (who had introduced them in the first place), Kirra's mother and father and - on occasion - her uncle, cousin and older brother. Very rarely was Saetan excluded from the many lists of appropriate company the various Kindred had for their numerous Queens but Shadow had proven to be an exception to this rule. He had decided that Saetan 'already had enough Queens to play with' and that 'he didn't need another one - especially not his one' (in those exact words).

"Of course little one." He smiled affectionately at her. "Enjoy yourself."

She grinned at him. "Was Shadow by the Keep to complain while I was away?" she asked knowingly. He gave her an annoyed look and gently shoved her in the direction of the door.

"Away with you. You have little Brothers to visit."

One golden eye peered suspiciously at the female. She sighed softly and cuddled up closer to him, gently petting his head. "I'm fine."

/ Not need healer? ./ he asked for confirmation. Worry coated the psychic thread and she gave a tentative smile.

"No. I don't need a healer. I'm just a little tired."

/ Then sleep. / he grumbled in annoyance. He nipped her gently in reprimand. / Silly human. /

She rolled her eyes in response and prodded him in the shoulder. He pinned his ears and opened his eyes to glare at her. "I'm fine."

/ Then no complain. / Shadow honestly believed he would never understand female logic. If his Queen was tired she should sleep. He continued to peer at her with a baffled expression as she explained again why sleep wouldn't help this tiredness.

"Sleeping won't help this sleepiness. I just need to get away from the bustle on Earth and away from the rest of the family for a few days for myself. I want you and KaeAskavi to come with me."

/ Why need him? ./ Shadow demanded indignantly. / He not know this territory. /

"Neither do you," she reminded him. He gave a snort that said he clearly didn't think that was the point of the argument. "What's wrong with KaeAskavi? I thought you liked him."

/ Sometimes like him/ Shadow correctly primly, clicking his jaw sharply. / Sometimes not like him. /

"Can you like him long enough to let me rest while the three of us go camping?"

Shadow thought about that. KaeAskavi was a good Warlord Prince. He had worn the Purple-Dusk as his Birthright, just like Shadow had. At first, when they had met and agreed that they could tolerate the other for the sake of their Queen, everything had been fine. But when KaeAskavi came away from his Offering with the Sapphire and Shadow had only managed the Green the wolf had decided that he didn't like KaeAskavi anymore. Shadow wanted to be useful to his Queen but if KaeAskavi was stronger than him as well as bigger then Shadow might not be useful anymore. Plus KaeAskavi had spent much of his kitten-hood among humans - and accompanying a Blood female named Della - and so knew more about them then Shadow (who had left his pack only shortly before KaeAskavi had decided that Kirra was going to be his Queen) did.

But Kirra had come to him first... Shadow huffed softly. / Will like him/ he decided. His tail thumped happily against the bed when she squealed in delight and hugged him tightly.

Perhaps he should agree with the Arcerian cat more often. KaeAskavi gave a growl-grumble of annoyance as he picked his way into Kirra and Shadow's psychic conversation thread. Shadow was one of his best friends but the wolf was suspicious of everything. Silently, the nearly-full grown cat wished that, perhaps, one day Shadow would be his friend like Ladvarian was his sire's friend. But then again, Kaelas was a Warlord Prince who was friends with a Warlord, not a Warlord Prince who was friends with another Warlord Prince.

But Kirra's father was Warlord Prince who was friends with many Warlord Princes. KaeAskavi perked up at that, his ears flicking forwards as he continued along that thought. But her father had been the only one who was able to destroy anyone who had dared challenge his claim to his Queen. KaeAskavi doubted that he would have enough power to do the same for his own Queen.

He felt the cautious brush on a psychic spear thread and followed it to Shadow's mind. The other Warlord Prince was wary of his unannounced presence and asked, / Are you coming in to see the little one? ./

KaeAskavi sent back his own question, wary of the wolf's response. / Does she want to see me? ./ 'Do you want me to see her?' was the implied question.

Shadow's growl of acceptance could be heard through the door of their Queen's rooms. / She wants to see you. /

KaeAskavi entered the forest-green suite and hopped up onto the bed - strengthened with Craft to support the weight of several of the Kindred at once - and nuzzled the hair of his Queen. Shadow snorted softly and stuck his nose out to demand a greeting. KaeAskavi growled softly and allowed his friend to sniff him warily before he was allowed to settle down on the bed. Kirra still snuggled against Shadow but KaeAskavi cuddled against her back. She reached up with one hand to pet him before she yawned tiredly again.

/ Need sleep? ./ the Arcerian asked curiously. Shadow snorted, grumbling something about silly humans while Kirra rolled her eyes and chose to answer with a simple 'no'. KaeAskavi - realizing he wouldn't understand his Queen's logic on this matter - accepted her response with a purr of happiness.

"KaeAskvai? You're going to come aren't you?" Kirra murmured with yet another yawn.

/ Yes/ he replied simply, sniffing as though the very notion he wouldn't was ridiculous. / Kindred will protect the little one. /

"The little one doesn't need protecting..." Kirra grumbled sulkily.

Both Warlord Princes looked at her blankly before snorting in disbelief and sharing an amused look. Kirra glared at both and sat up. They watched as she moodily stalked into her adjoining sitting room muttering about 'troublesome males' as she went.

Harry sat through Mrs. Weasley's fussing with a vague sense of uneasiness. Kirra had returned after vanishing for a few days in a much better mood. Unfortunately when he had confronted her again about his 'Birthright Jewels' she had simply stared and got that faraway look in her eye before murmuring an apology and taking off.

She looked positively jittery now and he was restraining himself from lashing out in an attempt to find out the source of her discontent. He kept glancing over at her as she pushed food around her plate without actually eating. She wore a strange sort of expression - a mixture between annoyance and amusement - but he was unable to discern the source of her emotion. He was nodding absently whenever people talked to him, not particularly caring what was being said. He felt unusually confident about his hearing, almost as though any initial nervousness had been whisked away into some dark corner deep in the house during Mrs. Weasley's constant cleaning.

"Don't lose your temper," Sirius said abruptly, pulling him from his musings. "Be polite and stick to the facts." Something deeply troubled flickered in his eyes. Kirra glanced down suddenly, staring between the two suspiciously before she returned to her faraway thoughts.

"The law's on your side," Lupin murmured. "Even underage wizards are allowed to use magic in life-threatening situations."

Something about that statement clicked, for the first time, and he frowned. "What about Kirra?" Lupin looked puzzled and shot a glance down to the female. She had stiffened and was refusing to acknowledge the conversation. "She used magic too: to keep them away from Dudley."

"She doesn't need a hearing," Sirius interjected promptly. "She had her mum's wand on her at the time so it didn't register as under-age magic. Her mum already went and explained the situation to the ministry after she used Kirra's wand to do some cleaning around the house." The two of them, Kirra and his godfather, both nodded.

"Our wands are nearly identical, see?" she added. "I don't have mine here right now - they wanted to inspect mine to be sure that the error was plausible - but I'll be coming with you to the Ministry to pick it up." Sirius's gaze sharpened but Harry didn't think anyone else noticed it.

"Oh." Lupin nodded pleasantly. "Yes, that would explain it. See Harry? Just a little bad luck that turned out for the best."

Harry nodded but somehow the explanation didn't settle quite right. Nonetheless he recognized a hint when he saw one and remained silent on the subject. Sirius played with an opalescent pendant - that was, incidentally, an opal - on an elegant, but still masculine, chain nervously. Mrs. Weasley fingered a simple gold band around her ring finger on her right hand. Harry caught the glint of a light blue stone flickering on it but turned away when Arthur stood.

"I think we'll go now. We're a bit early, but I think you'd be better off at the Ministry than hanging around here." He made a brief gesture to Kirra. "You too Kirra. You needed to pick up your wand...?"

"Yes." She rose, letting Molly collect her half-eaten meal with a worried little noise. "I'm coming."

The train ride to the Ministry was rather boring, in Harry's opinion. Though Mr. Weasley made it slightly more entertaining with his fascination at Muggle devices (the automatic ticket dispenser that was out-of-order was particularly amusing), it still lacked anything that could shake the deeply rooted calm that was sinking into his veins. Kirra kept rolling her ring around her finger, staring off into space and blinking back to attention whenever the train stopped.

When they finally arrived there was a moments confusion about the location of the Ministry that jostled Harry from his calm and caused a hint of worry and annoyance to rise to the surface. But Mr. Weasley remembered quick enough and they were back on their way. Kirra was no longer playing with her ring but she was watching everything as though it was going to suddenly leap out at her. She wasn't jumpy about it; but she was wary.

"Here we are," Mr Weasley announced. After bustling the three of them into an old red, heavily graffitied, telephone-box, he punched in a sequence of numbers.

After a moment a cool female voice rang clear in the cramped space. Kirra - being rather cramped in the corner at Harry's shoulder - looked around for the source. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic. Please state your name and purpose."

"Arthur Weasley, Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, here to escort Harry Potter to a disciplinary hearing and Kirra S.D., here to..."

"Here to ensure her plans are going as scheduled," Kirra interrupted smoothly. "Also to pick up her new wand as the Ministry has ruined my old one, no doubt."

"Thank you. Visitors, please take the badge and attach it to the front of your robes." Two shiny silver badges rattled in the change-slot and the two teens promptly stuck it to the front of their clothing. Harry's read, Harry Potter, Disciplinary Hearing while Kirra's read Kirra S.D., Issues with the Ministry's Actions and Schedule Planning. She looked amused at it as she pinned it to her black sweater with the off-side folded collar. "Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium."

The Telephone booth then promptly sank down, like an elevator, into the earth. They were cramped inside the small space for about a minute before the doors opened and they piled out into the large gleaming hall. "The Ministry of Magic wishes you a pleasant day," the voice informed them in the same monotone.

Kirra glared at it for some time before it disappeared upwards again. "I don't know about you but I have business to take care of. And as I don't have my wand I shan't be submitting to any such registration." She nodded curtly to the two males. "I'll see you after the hearing, if I'm finished by then."

"You are Harry James Potter, of number four, Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey?" Fudge asked as he glared at Harry over the top of his long roll of parchment.

Instead of the tremble of fear he should have felt, Harry simply stared calmly at Fudge and ignored the quiet rattle of the chains of his chair. "Yes."

"You received an official warning from the Ministry for using illegal magic three years ago, did you not?" Fudge continued.

Harry tilted his head in a nod. "Yes, but -"

"And yet you conjured a Patronus on the night of the second of August?"

"Yes, but -"

"Knowing that you are not permitted to use magic outside of school while under the age of seventeen?"

"Yes, but -"

"Knowing you were in an area full of Muggles?"

Harry was thoroughly annoyed now and took a deep breath before responding.. "Yes, but -"

"Fully aware that you were in close proximity of a Muggle at the time?"

"Yes," Harry growled and the sound of his voice, so low and dangerous, must have startled some of the plum-robed wizards and witches in the rows closer to the front. "But I only did it because of the -"

The witch to the left of fudge who wore a monocle - Madame Bones - surveyed him with a decent amount of interest. "You produced a fully-fledged Patronus?"

Harry turned his attention to her, grateful for the distraction, but still furious at Fudge's unrelenting questioning. "Yes." He wasn't going to bother explaining if they weren't going to listen.

"A corporeal Patronus?"

"A - what?" Harry tilted his head, puzzled at the unfamiliar terminology.

"That is to say, your Patronus had a clearly defined form? It was more than vapour or smoke?" She looked genuinely interested now,

and Harry knew this questioning was coming from her personally and not from the assembled Wizengamot.

"Yes," he replied easily, allowing his fury to twine in with the deep feeling of calm, "it's a stag. It's always a stag."

"Always?" Madame Bones boomed in effectively concealed surprise. "You have produced a Patronus before now?"

"I've been conjuring them for over a year now," Harry replied evenly. "Professor Lupin taught me in my third year because of the -"

"Impressive," she murmured. "A true Patronus at his age...very impressive."

Many of the witches and wizards were muttering to themselves and glaring now but a fair enough amount looked appropriately impressed and were nodding to one another. Harry decided that the approval because of her examination of his efforts was enough to make up for interrupting his attempt at explaining.

"It's not a question of how impressive the magic was," Fudge bit out testily, annoyed at his abruptly halted questioning, "in fact, I'd say that the more impressive it was the worse, given that the boy did it in plain view of a Muggle!"

Those who had frowned and glared now murmured in agreement. Harry felt as though something slimy and disgusting had settled on his skin at the sound of their voices and narrowed his eyes at Fudge. He mentally tried to shake the feeling of being unclean and dove deeper into the cool calmness. Something prickled on the edges of his awareness but he ignored it.

When he spoke he was slightly unnerved at the dead calm tone he used. It echoed through the darkened room so he hardly had to raise his voice. "I did it because of the Dementors. I think that my actions were justified." Murmurs of discontent and fear rose and then fell silent.

"Dementors?" Madame Bones asked, raising her eyebrows so high in surprise that her monocle threatened to fall out. "What do you mean boy?"

"I mean," he felt Dumbledore shift ever so slightly in his chair, "that Dementors attacked me, my cousin, and my friend, Kirra, in the alleyway."

"Ah." Fudge smirked as though he had won something grand, looking around at the rest of the Wizengamot as though inviting them to laugh at a particularly hilarious joke. "Yes. Yes, I thought we'd be hearing something like this."

"You mean something like the truth, as opposed to the lies you spew every day?" Harry asked mildly, a dangerous croon entering his voice. Fudge looked thoroughly rattled at the tone, having expected some loud desperate rant that would enforce his theory that Harry was only out to tell lies to save his skin.

"Yes, well..." He shuffled his papers and quickly gathered back his haughty facade. Harry knew he was still off-balance from the comment. "It's obvious that you've thought this through. Dementors can't be seen by Muggles, can they, boy? Highly convenient, highly convenient... so it's just your word and no witnesses?"

Dumbledore cleared his throat, effectively silencing any mutters. "Actually. We do, in fact, have two witnesses to the presence of Dementors in the alleyway, aside from Dudley Dursley, I mean."

Fudge's plump face, with all its arrogance, seemed to deflate. His carefully planned questioning was all being ruined by the dead calm of the boy before him and the ever-crafty Dumbledore. He stared for a moment and his eyes flickered as he tried to find a loophole. Finally he pulled himself back up and spoke in a falsely grave voice. "We haven't got time to listen to more tarradiddles, I'm afraid, Dumbledore. I want this dealt with quickly -"

"I may be wrong," Dumbledore cut in pleasantly, "but I am sure that under the Wizengamot Charter of Rights, the accused has the right to present witnesses for his or her case? Isn't that the policy of the

Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Madame Bones?" He addressed the monocled witch now.

"True." Her eyes glimmered in delight. "Perfectly true."

"Oh, very well, very well," Fudge snapped. "Where are there people?"

"I brought one with me and I'm certain that the other is lingering nearby. Should I -?"

"No need." Harry looked over as Kirra entered the room, followed by a highly nervous Mrs. Figg. She looked even battier than ever and still wore carpet slippers. Kirra, on the other hand, looked perfectly composed and was regarding the large assembly of wizards and witches with cool interest. Her short, spiky, hair glowed eerily in the faint light as she crossed the room quickly and stood near Dumbledore. "I let myself in, if that's all right. The doors are paper-thin you know? Really should fix that." Harry's headmaster gave a small half-smile and quickly conjured two more chairs, offering his to Mrs. Figg and settling down between the two women. Kirra sank into the chair gracefully and tilted her head to Harry politely. He caught the glimmer of amusement in her eyes and rose up from the deep calm so that he could offer her a tentative and tired smile.

"Full names?" Fudge asked loudly, the moment they were both settled.

"Arabella Doreen Figg," said Mrs. Figg in a quavering voice. Kirra's was a stark contrast.

Loud and clear and perfectly confident she responded promptly. "Kirra S.D."

"I do believe I requested your full name," Fudge told her waspishly.

Icy blue eyes narrowed in distaste. "I do believe that is all you are going to get." A staring match ensued which Dumbledore stopped quickly enough.

"Kirra is registered under the surname S.D.," he informed Fudge calmly.

Fudge turned to Madame Bones for confirmation. She tapped her wand to a piece of parchment and after a moment of scanning she nodded. "She is indeed registered under the surname S.D." She frowned at Mrs. Figg. "Though there is no witch or wizard registered as living in the area of Little Whinging, other than Harry Potter."

"Well I'm a Squib," she replied testily. Her voice no longer quavering nervously, it was rather annoyed actually. "So you wouldn't have me registered now would you?"

"A Squib eh?" Fudge peered at her suspiciously. Kirra overran whatever he was about to say.

"I believe Mrs. Figg has made that clear Mr Fudge." Although she included the 'Mr', there wasn't much more than a facade of respect in her voice. Harry resisted the urge to snicker at the dark amusement in her eyes.

Fudge continued after shooting her a glare. "Can Squibs even see Dementors?"

"We most certainly can!"

"Very well." His aloof tone made Harry bristle. "What is your story?"

"I had gone to buy cat for from the corner shop at the end of Wisteria Walk, around nine o'clock, on the evening of August second." She began at once - and even to Harry it sounded painfully rehearsed. "I heard a disturbance down the alleyway between Magnolia Crescent and Wisteria Walk. On approaching the mouth of the alleyway I saw Dementors running -"

"Running?" Madame Bones interjected sharply. "Dementors don't run, they glide."

Mrs Figg flushed. "That's what I meant to say. Gliding along the alley towards what looked like two boys and a female of the same age."

"What did they look like?"

"Well, one was very large and the other one rather skinny and the girl -"

"No, no," she said impatiently. "The Dementors... describe them."

"Oh." The blush crept up her neck. "They were big. Big and wearing cloaks."

Harry felt uneasy and tried to dive back into the calm he had retained from before but found himself unable to. Kirra was fixed on Mrs Figg as she tried to regain her footing as the Wizengamot snorted and snickered at her lacking description.

"I also felt them. Everything went cold and I felt... as though all the happiness had gone from the world...and I remembered...dreadful things..." Her voice shook and she lowered her eyes as it trailed off. Harry sympathized with her, knowing firsthand how horrible Dementors were.

Madam Bones's eyes widened, a sign that she recognized the sincerity of the description. Harry could see faint red marks where the monocle had dug into her eyebrow. "What did the Dementors do?" she asked, and Harry heard the faint gentling of the severity of her tone.

"They went for the boys. One had fallen and the girl was nearer him. The other boy, that was Harry, was backing up and trying to produce a Patronus. He tried twice and only produced vapour. The dementors were blocking the other two by now and on his third try he produced a Patronus that charged the first Dementor and then, with his encouragement, chased the second away from his cousin and Kirra over there." Mrs Figg nodded in Kirra's direction. She tilted her head in acknowledgement. "The boy looked horribly but she was still standing, at least. And that... that is what happened." The ending was rather lame and the elderly woman wrung her hands nervously under the stares.

"And your story Miss S.D.?" Madame Bones turned to face Kirra. The girl straightened and took a moment to collect her thoughts. When she spoke her voice held a fair amount of the strange midnight-voice she had used after the attacks while they had been in the kitchen with Harry's relatives.

"The Dursleys had invited my family for supper," she began primly. "I didn't care for their chatter so I asked Harry to show me around the neighbourhood and invited Dudley to stop my parents from complaining. We walked and talked about nothing in particular until we reached the park. Harry and I felt something odd in the air and decided to head back, as it was later than we realized. Dudley tagged along because he's a great oaf and he didn't want Harry stealing me away - like he even stood a chance in the first place - when we went to the alleyway." She paused and shot a look at Fudge as though daring him to contradict her. When he issued no sound she continued. "Dudley panicked when he first felt the Dementors and ran past. I couldn't see Harry because it was so dark in the alley with the addition of the Dementors so I tried to find the idiot before he got his soul sucked out. I figured Harry would figure something out to save himself and that I could get myself out - Dudley too, even though I don't particularly like the git. Bit of luck really, that the Dementors wanted Harry, because they didn't show too much interest in us. Harry conjured a patronus and it took out the Dementors before any lasting damage was done." She smirked slightly. "Though I think Dudley might be a wee bit afraid of the dark for awhile."

Madame Bones surveyed the two witnesses in silence and Fudge fiddled noisily with his papers. Finally he snapped out, rather aggressively, "Is that what you saw then?"

"That is what happened." Mrs Figg repeated firmly.

"Why would I lie?" Kirra asked rhetorically in response. "But if you want a straight answer then that would be a one-hundred percent positive."

TBC...

Chapter#4

"You may leave then," Fudge snapped irritably. Obviously Kirra's account, with the confidence and natural language had put out his attempt at discrediting Mrs Figg as a solid witness. Kirra stood and offered Dumbledore a curt nod, Harry a smile and Madame Bones a polite tilt of her head before she left the room. Mrs Figg shuffled out after her.

"Not a very convincing witness," Fudge declared loftily.

"Oh, I thought Kirra's was quite convincing," Madame Bones said in her booming voice. "And Mrs Figg offered an accurate description of a Dementor attack, despite being rather nervous about her account. I can't imagine why she would say they were there if they weren't."

"But Dementors just wandering into a Muggle suburb and just happening to come across a wizard?" Fudge snorted in disbelief. "Surely the odds of that happening must be very, very long. Even Bagman wouldn't bet -"

"Oh I don't think anyone believes they were there by coincidence," Dumbledore commented airily. The witch to the right of Fudge shifted slightly but everyone else remained silent.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I think they were ordered there," Dumbledore continued lightly.

"I think we might have a record of it if someone had ordered a pair of Dementors to go strolling through Little Whinging!" the Minister barked. His face was red with fury and reminded Harry of a ripe tomato. He tilted his head and tried to imagine Fudge's usual green bowler perched on the man's head... it would look a lot like the stem...

"Not if the Dementors are taking orders from someone other than the Ministry." Dumbledore's twinkling eyes hardened ever so fractionally. "I have already shared my views on the matter with you, Cornelius."

"Yes, you have," he replied back forcefully. "And I have no reason to believe your views are anything other than bilge, Dumbledore. The Dementors stay in Azkaban and do everything we tell them!"

"Then we must ask ourselves why anyone in the Ministry ordered those two Dementors into Little Whinging on the second of August." Fudge flushed brighter but Dumbledore continued to survey him calmly. Harry's gaze shifted when the witch to the right of Fudge shifted into the light for the first time.

Fudge glanced over and spoke, "The Chair recognises Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister."

The horribly girlish, high-pitched, fluttery voice grated at Harry's nerves as he tried to drown it out in the dead calm that still lingered inside of him. He wanted to sigh in relief when the calm embraced him and dulled the horrible chills her voice called.

"I must have misunderstood you, Professor Dumbledore. So silly of me. But it sounded for a teensy moment as though you were suggesting the Ministry of Magic had ordered an attack on this boy!" Her silvery laugh made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and he was surprised when a low growl issued from the back of his throat. The further the calm pulled him down the quieter the sound got so he allowed it to continue.

"If it is true that the Dementors are only taking orders from the Ministry of Magic then it follows logically that somebody at the Ministry might have ordered the attacks on Harry and his cousin and friend a week ago." His voice was polite but Harry knew he was being anything but. "Of course, if these particular Dementors are outside of the Ministry's control -"

"There are no Dementors outside Ministry control!" Fudge snapped. He had gone from tomato-red to the darker shade of brick-red in less than a few sentences. Dumbledore inclined his head in a little bow.

"Then undoubtably the Ministry will be making a full inquiry."

"It is not for you to decide what the Ministry does or does not do, Dumbledore!" Brick-red had progressed to a lovely (and very familiar, to Harry) shade of magenta.

"Of course it isn't," Dumbledore replied mildly. He looked at Madame Bones and she readjusted her monocle and frowned slightly. "I was merely expressing my confidence that the matter will not go uninvestigated."

"The subject of this hearing is not the behaviour of these two Dementors, if they are indeed not simply a figment of this boy's imagination!" Fudge roared. "We are here to examine Harry Potter's offences under the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery!"

"Of course we are," said Dumbledore. "But then, that makes the presence of Dementors quite important. Clause Seven of the Decree states that magic may be used before Muggles in exceptional circumstances, and as though exceptional circumstances include situations which threaten the life of the wizard or witch him- or herself, or any witches, wizards or Muggles present at the time of the -"

"We are familiar with Clause Seven, thank you very much!" Fudge snarled nastily.

"Then I am certain you must also see how Dementors fall into the category of exceptional circumstances -"

"If there were Dementors, which I highly doubt!"

"You've heard from two witnesses," Harry interrupted. Dumbledore looked over at him and remained quiet so that he could continue. "Unless you think they're lying."

"Which in that case I am certain neither would object to testifying again," Dumbledore took over pleasantly.

"I - that - not," Fudge blustered, "It's - I want this over with today, Dumbledore!"

"So it would not matter how many times you heard from a witness, if the alternative was a serious miscarriage of justice."

"Serious miscarriage!" he bellowed. "Have you ever bothered to count up the number of cock-and-bull stories this boy has come up with to cover up his flagrant use of magic outside of school? I suppose you've forgotten the Hover Charm he used three years ago -"

"That was a house-elf," Harry interrupted coolly.

"YOU SEE!" He waved wildly at the motionless boy. "A house-elf, in a Muggle house! I ask you."

"That house-elf currently is under employment at Hogwarts," Dumbledore informed cheerily. "I could summon him if you wish..."

"He blew up his aunt, for god's sake!" Fudge slammed his fist on his desk and sent a bottle of ink spilling everywhere.

"Which you kindly did not press charges for, on that occasion, having accepted that even the best wizards can not always control their tempers." Dumbledore watched him mop up the ink pointedly. Harry held back the smirk.

"And I haven't even started on what he gets up to at school."

"Hogwarts is a school for magic," Harry stated simply. "I'm allowed to use magic there so I really don't see a problem." Dumbledore nodded in agreement.

"Don't see a problem!"

"The Ministry does not have the power to expel students, Cornelius," Dumbledore said with a suggestion of coolness behind his words. "Nor does it have the power to confiscate wands until charges have successfully been proven. In your admirable haste to make sure the law is upheld you certainly have seemed to have overlooked a few yourself."

"Laws can be changed," he snarled savagely.

"Of course they can. Why, in the few short weeks I was asked to leave the Wizengamot it had become a practice to hold a full criminal trial for a simple matter of underage magic!" A few of the wizards shifted uncomfortably, properly ashamed of themselves. Fudge turned a shade of puce that Harry did not think existed until that moment. "As far as I am aware, there is no law that says it is this court's job to punish Harry for every bit of magic he has ever preformed. He has presented his witnesses for a specific offence and now all he can do is wait for your verdict."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, steepled his fingertips and said no more. The assembled Wizengamot fell into urgent, whispered conversations. Harry knew that Dumbledore was avoiding his gaze - and had been since the trial began - and so did not bother trying to catch his eye. Instead he stared up boredly, slipping in and out of the dead calm in his veins just to feel the pleasant coolness wash over him each time he dove back down.

He was certain he had made a good impression. He hadn't yelled or lost his temper or done anything to even suggest that they had rattled him with their questioning. The only time he could remember feeding fuel to their fire was near the beginning where he allowed Fudge to overrun his words every time he spoke.

Mrs Figg had done a good job as well. Although it had sounded rather rehearsed, there was no way that anyone could act out the fear and horror in her voice as she recounted the feeling of the Dementors.

Kirra, though curt and rather snarly towards Fudge, had been polite to Madame Bones - who had done most of her questioning. She had been composed perfectly and had radiated confidence. He smirked to himself when he remembered the uneasy looks the members he could make out had worn when they were subjected to her midnight-voice as she recounted her version of events.

The whispering stopped. Harry looked up slowly, a sleepy, expectant, look in his eyes. Madame Bones cleared her throat. "All in favour of clearing the witness of all charges?"

More than half of the hands were raised. He didn't bother to count. "All opposed?" Fudge and a few others, including the witch to his right.

Fudge looked around, looking as though the result was making him physically ill. Finally he took several deep breaths and spoke, "Very well...cleared of all charges."

"Excellent." Dumbledore stood quickly and vanished his conjured chairs. "Well, I must be getting along. Good day to you all." He swept out of the dungeon without so much as a backward glance. Harry exited after a moment's feeling of disappointment. He could hear Kirra's soft farewell to his headmaster and decided that she sounded as annoyed as he was upset. He walked quickly to the door - not wanting them to find any reason to call him back now that Dumbledore was no longer defending him.

"Where are we going?" Harry demanded. Kirra was tugging him down the street - rather dangerously, out of Headquarters - with a frantic but ecstatic look on her face. She shot him a glare and hissed at him to be silent. He complied but continued to stare at her, willing an answer.

"Right here." She suddenly paused and looked at him. "Ready?"

"For what?"

"This." She grinned wickedly and he felt a strange dark power grab him and suddenly he was hurtling through an abyss of black.

It stretched on for miles and beyond; never failing and darker than anything he had ever seen. Surrounding him and buffeting against his clothes was a strange wind. Bits of brilliant sparkling sapphire light lit up and Harry looked around. Kirra was right at his arm, still tugging him along as the dark power propelled them along the wind. Staring out through the sparkling of colour he noticed other colours just above and below him making a monstrous web.

Far off in the distance, separate but still within sight, was a trio of webs. Higher above the middle one they were level with was a

second group of multicoloured web and deeper below was another. The three sets of webs remained separate at all times, except at one spot. Something huge and dark loomed there and he continued to stare in awe at the sight around him. Their web didn't meet at the darkened point, at the tiny pinprick of light, but there wasn't a very huge gap of black between them.

"Where are we?" Kirra looked over at his question.

"We're riding the Winds on Earth. We need to get to that far edge and then I can manage to jump us across onto the Kaeleer Winds." She looked eager as the power increased and they sped along the sapphire coloured wind even faster.

"But where are we?"

"We're still on Earth." She laughed lightly. "But the Winds can only be accessed by the Blood. They're a form of long-distance travel. Those lights are landing webs. There aren't many because Draca couldn't find enough to cover all of Earth so I had to space them out evenly. You'd have some trouble accessing them without a landing web but I can feel the Winds no matter where I am."

Harry looked down, half expecting to see continents and the like but was unnerved to find nothing but the abyss of inky blackness. He looked back at Kirra but her eyes were set on the flicker of light coming from the huge shape that linked the trio of multicoloured webs together. Finally she looked over at him and grinned daringly. "Ready?"

"For what?" he echoed just as he had done before. She smirked and pulled him along as she flung the two of them out into the abyss of darkness. The moment they exited the web the space was swallowed up. He couldn't see the webs or the flickers of light nor anything else. He could feel Kirra tugging his arm but he couldn't see her. He couldn't even see himself!

Finally he felt the same power tug at him again and suddenly his world was flooded with light. He was on his hands and knees beside a tall pedestal with a strange translucent stone perched atop it. Kirra

was looking around with an expression of contentment on her face as she drank in the sight.

He stood slowly, his instincts screaming at him about enemies all around. "Where are we?" he asked quietly.

Kirra jumped as though startled and stared at him. "Oh! Right." She grinned. "We're in the Keep in Kaeleer. I'm surprised you're awake after that blind jump through the darkness."

"Kaeleer?"

"Mmm hmm," she hummed happily. "The Shadow Realm. I've been planning this for weeks but I couldn't drag you off until after your friends had their little party to celebrate you getting off on those charges. This is where I was born."

"Here?" he asked incredulously, looking around.

"Not here exactly." She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "But in this Realm. My whole family lives here and my grandpapa even works here in the Keep with Geoffrey and Draca."

"Yesss?" Harry whirled when he heard the sibilant voice; it reminded him far too much of Parseltongue than he would have liked. The woman who stared back at him also reminded him uncomfortably of Voldemort, with her reptilian features and unwavering stare.

Kirra looked pleased to see her. "Draca." She held out both of her hands and they greeted one another. "Is grandpapa around?"

"He isss hiding in hisss office, I believe. Lucien and Daemonar musst have gotten into trouble again." Her voice was amused. "Will you be ssstaying long?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe. Depends on whether or not grandpapa approves of Harry."

"Isss that hisss name?" The woman, Draca, turned to look at him in interest. "The one who sssurvived thisss Avada Kedavra I have heard about?"

"The same." Kirra nodded pleasantly and smiled at Harry over her shoulder. "He's a Sapphire Jeweled Warlord Prince."

"Isss he?" Draca observed him carefully before she turned to Kirra once more. "When you are finished with Sssaetan, pleasssse remember to vissssit with the rest of the family. Your brother and cousssin have been visssiting far too often. Asss well asss your Kindred friendssss."

"They have?" She looked annoyed and amused at the same time. "Thanks Draca. I'll remember that."

"It wasss my pleasssure."

"Come on Harry!" Kirra snagged his arm and tugged him through the doors of the room. "You have to meet with grandpapa." Saetan regarded his grandsons sternly. They both looked incredibly calm - if not a little petulant - at being called to his office for a lecture. But really, they had been causing more trouble than usual with their little one off and wandering. And he understood how they felt, having gone through the same thing when Jaenelle was a child (Darkness knows she still managed to surprise him) but really... He sighed in exasperation. What in hell possessed them to even attempt entering Mrs Beale's kitchen?

"Explain to me again why you felt it was necessary to poke about Mrs Beale's kitchen without her permission?"

Lucien remained silent but his lips curled up in a wicked smirk. His cousin grinned, baring fangs. "Well," Daemonar began airily, "with the little one away we didn't dare try and have any adventures without her."

"At least not ones she would enjoy," Lucien murmured, eyes burning with mirth.

"And we were getting bored so we tried to think of something interesting to do -"

"- something no one has done before -"

"- so we thought of Mrs Beale's kitchen. My mum used to trade recipes with her and she was allowed in but no one else has ever managed it. So we thought - since we knew the little one doesn't find it hard to get into her kitchen - that we could try it too."

"He was using me as a secret weapon." Lucien grinned arrogantly. "My father showed me how to get on her good side so Daemonar thought he could get away with invading the kitchen if I was there too." His cousin shot him a dirty look. "Needless to say, it didn't work."

Daemonar snorted. "Obviously."

Saetan resisted the urge to rub his temples to fend off the impending headache. Why oh why did his sons have to raise miniature versions of themselves? Oh certainly, Lucien didn't have the same suspicion of every female that his father did and Daemonar didn't hold any disgust for unknown females but still...

What was worse was that his sons felt that he deserved to be the one to discipline his grandchildren. They seemed to be under the impression that he was fair about his punishments and that he would try and hide away from them if their sons weren't there regularly to remind him that they existed and how much 'help' they needed to raise the two boys.

All that translated to in Saetan's mind was 'payback'.

"So what did you do exactly, after accomplishing the entry of the kitchens?"

"Well Lucien didn't want to get caught so he had us both wrapped in sight and aural shields. So when I thought we were safe and I dropped the shields I might have...startled...Mrs Beale a little." Daemonar glared at his younger cousin (who actually wasn't much younger, only five or six years) who was studiously ignoring him.

"Then Lucien dropped his shields to try and comfort her and she got even worse and then..."

"And then the pups panicked because they thought that their 'mother' was being attacked..."

"So they tore into the kitchen and made her special roast go flying off the counter..."

"...and right into the apple pie she was making for after supper."

"So she told my father what we did and he just gave us that look - the one that you give mother - and told us to go see our grandfather for awhile," Lucien finished with a half-smirk. Saetan wished he could summon the rage to glower at the two of them but all he could manage was to remove his glasses and mutter quiet obscenities that his grandsons couldn't make out.

A knock sounded at the door and the two turned to face it curiously. "Come in," Saetan called tiredly. A spiky blonde-haired witch poked her head in with a smile that promptly turned into a look of horror.

"Lucien...Daemonar... what are you doing here?" she demanded, glancing back into the hallway anxiously.

Daemonar's eyes narrowed on her and Lucien raised a brow. "What are you hiding behind your back, little one?"

"Umm...nothing?"

"Think again, little witch." Daemonar took one step forward and then exploded. He lunged for her and caught her before she could disappear behind the door. She yelped as Lucien calmly came up and surveyed the male behind her. The boy was glaring darkly from behind round glasses and Lucien could easily make out the possessiveness in his psychic scent. "So who's this then?"

Saetan stood quickly and prodded his grandsons out of the way with his cane. "Leave the Prince alone boy," he growled at Lucien. The male raised a brow in mimicry of the haughty way his father always

did when being ordered. "Do you want me to tell your mother?" The boy scowled and backed away, turning to face his younger sister as she struggled in his cousin's grasp.

"Put her down Damonar. I'm sure she has an explanation as to why she was away for so long." The Eyrien eyed her doubtfully as he set her down on an armchair. She scowled at both of them and stuck out her tongue. "Stick that out again and it's mine." She promptly withdrew the pink muscle and continued to scowl.

"I had to be a witness at Harry's hearing. That's Harry, by the way." She pointed at the newcomer who was watching them all warily. "He's a Sapphire Jeweled Warlord Prince."

"So this is the one then?" Saetan looked down at the green-eyed male with newfound interest. "I'll take care of him while you deal with these two then. Come along Prince." Saetan gripped the teen's shoulder and steered him firmly out into the hallway while he used Craft to shut the door behind him before his grandsons could make a move on the new Warlord Prince who was laying claim to their little Queen.

Harry looked at the obviously older male as he closed the door to the library with a heavy sigh. "I swear they get worse every day..." he muttered. Harry didn't comment, knowing that it wasn't supposed to be heard. The man glanced back at him and his tired features changed smoothly into ones of confidence and stern amusement. "So you're Harry."

"Yes." For some reason Harry felt he should have added 'sir' but stubbornly chose to go with his instincts as they chanted repeatedly to not let this male best him. "Who are you?"

"So blunt..." The man's lips curled upwards slightly in a faint smirk. "I am Saetan Daemon SaDiablo, the grandfather of the two now interrogating our young Kirra who also happens to be my granddaughter." Harry felt his instincts calm at the mention of familial relations. He continued to watch the male warily (he had heard about Satan before, but he knew that this Saetan and that Satan were different). Saetan regarded him silently for a moment before he continued. "Harry, do you know what a Warlord Prince is?"

"No..." Something inside him hummed in recognition at the term but other than that it was unfamiliar. "Why?"

Saetan smiled indulgently. "A Warlord Prince is a dangerous jeweled male ranked just below a Queen." Harry puzzled over that. He knew what a queen was (he did live in Britain) but he knew that type of queen and the type of Queen the elder male was speaking of were different. "You are a Warlord Prince, Harry."

A loud snarl interrupted anything else that might have been said. Harry turned towards the source and found himself in a glaring match with an irate looking...dog? No. Not a dog. A wolf. A chain around the wolf's neck sported a green jewel several shades darker than the average emerald. It continued to growl and Harry felt his temper rise at the threat. He almost didn't hear the soft sigh coming from the male behind him. He did, however, hear him when he spoke.

"Prince Shadow." There was a hint of weariness in the voice. "Is something wrong?"

The wolf snarled again and snapped his jaws. Saetan's face remained passive but Harry could practically feel the amusement. "Kirra brought him here personally. I don't think she would appreciate that type of welcome for her guest."

The wolf - Shadow - shot a suspicious look and growl at Saetan. Then he looked back at Harry. He growled once more for good measure and sat back on his haunches. Harry would have commented on the exchange but he was interrupted by a delighted laugh.

Kirra came bursting through the door and promptly swept the wolf up into a hug with a joyous cry of "Shadow!" Shadow's tail wagged happily and he licked enthusiastically at the female's face. She giggled once and then drew back. The wolf looked proud for a moment and then pinned his ears when she pinched them.

"I've told you not to threaten grandpapa or my guests!" she scolded. Shadow whined in protest. "I don't care if he's an unknown Warlord

Prince; that's no excuse to go off threatening him like that!" Shadow huffed doubtfully but offered a soft whine and another lick when Kirra's features twisted in annoyance.

Saetan stared at them passively. "I certainly wish I could see the reaction your father will have, after that."

TBC...

Chapter#5

Kirra shifted nervously before her father. Daemon SaDiablo was a terrifying sight when he was mad but the calm look he wore now was even more frightening. Not that Kirra was afraid - because she wasn't - but she was nervous. Her father was terribly possessive and protective of his females (often to the point of extreme, truth be told) and being his only daughter... well it wasn't exactly a good combination. "Papa?" She peered up at him with an innocent expression that he usually looked at once and then sent her to her grandpapa with. This time, however, he stared at her for the longest time before he sighed.

"You must get this from your mother..." he muttered. Kirra grinned. If her mother did the same then there was simply no way he would punish her for it.

"Get what from me?" Her mother came into the room without so much as a knock for warning and smiled at her daughter. One look at her husband and her lips curled in amusement. "Oh. That."

"It's not like I did it on purpose," she grumped. "How was I supposed to know that they were getting scolded? I wouldn't have brought him to see grandpapa if I knew they were there too."

Jaenelle laughed musically. The shimmering Twilight's Dawn jewel flickered several different colours before it settled to its usual shimmer. Kirra turned her head away with a blush adorning her cheeks, recognizing the implied solution. So she could have gone to the Abyss and checked where they were first but she had just come from jumping through the Darkness. Surely that allowed some leniency?

"You haven't even introduced us to the source of this little problem..." Her father was still muttering, mostly to himself, but to the two females as well.

"Yes. About that..." Kirra laughed nervously. "You see...Harry happens to be a Warlord Prince who doesn't exactly know...anything...about the Blood."

Jaenelle looked in interest at her daughter while Daemon sighed again and muttered several choice curses that his daughter didn't understand. His wife, however, did and shot him a reproachful look. He grunted softly and pulled her down into his lap, burying his face in her hair. Kirra smiled happily at the sight of her parents.

Neither of them had made it a point to hide their nightly activities from their children so public displays of affection were not something that made the children uncomfortable. Though when it came to his daughter, Daemon pointedly ignored the fact that she could even be interested in males (he found it painfully grating trying to restrain himself from ripping any 'offenders' apart). His son on the other hand... well he gave the boy instruction on seduction techniques. Just general ones really... though that was a rather poor way of describing a 'Talk' that had gone on over the course of four weeks with around three hours a day. Daemon still had more he wanted to share after that but Jaenelle had declared - and in her Queen voice, no less - that he was not going to fill their son's head with any more ideas than the four weeks already had. Daemon had relented reluctantly.

"So what do you plan on doing to the boy, now that you've brought him here?" Jaenelle asked curiously.

"Well...I was planning on asking Uncle Lucivar if he wanted to train Harry in weapons, but only if Daemonar didn't promise not to kill him first, and I was going to ask Lucien to teach him what papa told him and maybe let you, mama, teach him stuff that only we can teach him..." She paused for a moment and continued, "but then Daemonar got upset that he wasn't going to be able to smack Harry around and he promised not to kill him as long as he got to teach him weapons and then Lucien decided there was simply no way he was having that conversation with a Warlord Prince who went anywhere near me, then Shadow decided that he didn't like Harry and KaeAskavi is coming by the Hall tomorrow to meet him and make decisions." All that was said in one breath and it took a moment for it to sink in.

Daemon sighed. "So Daemonar is teaching him weapons, I'm supposed to teach him 'other stuff', Jaenelle is supposed to teach him air walking and the like and who exactly is going to teach him Craft?"

"Craft gets included with other stuff papa," Kirra dead-panned. "Grandpapa said he would help with Protocol and that though, if you wanted."

"As if you couldn't think of anything better to do..."
"Daemon Sadi." Offered hand.

"Harry Potter." The offered hand was taken.

Hands were shook.

"Kirra's your daughter?"

"Yes."

"I offer my sympathies."

"Much obliged."

It wasn't soon after that Kirra had the minor details hammered out with her parents and other family members that Harry began the first step in a three-week long crash course in Protocol, Craft and anything pertaining to the Blood and the Kindred. He found his mornings (unholy early mornings that they were) being dumped into an icy bath of water by a positively delighted Eyrien male - Daemonar - to be instructed in weapons. The rest of the day was spent with Saetan at the Keep or else at the hall learning Protocol and history as well as being educated in politics and finances and the like. Those lessons were usually interspersed with visits from various friends of Kirra's mother, including an absolutely wicked group of Queens called the Coven, and Kirra's mother herself who promptly took over the lessons and loaded him with exercises for his Craft. Their children were even worse as they were all fiercely loyal to one another and most especially to the females (which included Kirra, obviously). Evenings were devoted to Daemon, Kirra's father, who dabbled in teaching him Craft but with far...different...results in mind.

One of those days - the day that marked the end of his first week - found Harry curled up on his bed, exhausted after a particularly creative session with Daemon. He no longer had any doubt that they

would get worse as the man had yet to repeat himself - even with a whole three hours a day. He heard the soft knock at the door and muttered a tired "c'm in." (which translated to 'come in', were he properly awake).

Kirra poked her head in curiously but her features softened when she took in the sight of him collapsed on the bed. "Oh." She bit her lip worriedly. "Poor Harry. What have those females done to you? You look like papa when Kaelas is grumpy with him."

"Not females," he managed to grunt out, reaching out for the comfort of her darker presence and sighing happily when she settled on the edge of the bed and stroked his hair gently. "Daemon."

"Papa?" He couldn't see her as he'd removed his glasses and closed his eyes without any intention of opening them again that night but he could hear the perplexed look through her voice. "What did papa do?"

"He hasn't stopped yet," he moaned softly. "And hasn't repeated himself once!"

"Oh...oh!" He felt her tremble as she repressed laughter. "I see." He cracked open one eye and noticed she didn't bother to smother the wide amused grin that spread across her face. "Well I'm sorry to say, but papa had to shorten his original Talk - the one he gave Lucien and Daemonar (after Lucivar gave them both his own version) - for you since you aren't able to stay for that long. Theirs was about a week or so longer than yours." Harry paled at the very thought that one man could know so much about that. "And papa had more he wanted to tell them after that but mama and Aunt Marian were adamant that he stop. He has told you he was a pleasure slave before mama right?" Harry nodded carefully, not liking where this was going. "Has he mentioned that he was a pleasure slave for the majority of 1700 years?" Harry blanched and his eyes snapped open in disbelief.

"WHAT?"

Kirra laughed nervously as he shot into a sitting position. "1700 years. He's one of the long-lived raced you know? Just like Daemonar and

his family. I, myself, am looking at living well into my three or four thousands. Papa is in the prime of his life at 1700 so really just double that, give or take a few hundred, and that's our life expectancy..." She smiled brilliantly at him. "Have I mentioned that grandpapa is over 50 000 years old? And still counting?"

Harry groaned once more and collapsed back on his bed, head dizzy with the sudden revelations. Later he would remember a group of females - some he knew and some he didn't - fussing over him and scolding certain males for not telling him in the beginning when he had been less stressed with his lessons. The next day would be an interesting affair for everyone.

Instead of being awoken at dawn as usual, Harry found himself rising from a pleasant sleep around mid-morning like any normal person would. Immediately suspicious he wrapped Sapphire psychic shields around himself (he had gotten his Jewels set; one for the chain around his neck and the other for a ring and - after much consulting with the coven and a certain jeweller named Banard - a special handle had been crafted for his wand that somehow enhanced his own magical abilities without taking away from the suitability of his wand). He dressed in a semi-casual tunic that the seamstresses who had crafted it had declared 'brought out the blue in his eyes' (though how they saw any blue in his eyes he was uncertain). It was loose but not so loose that it swallowed him. After making sure he was finished he adjusted his glasses - a new frameless pair that had been imbedded with chips of the Sapphire in the arms of the spectacles - and exited the room. His first thought was to probe the immediate area for any males hiding in one of their perverse games of 'making sure he kept his guard up'. When he found none his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

A voice flitted down the hallway and he was soon staring at a smug looking Kirra who was accompanied by an equally smug wolf of about a year or two. Harry caught the female psychic scents quickly and relaxed, knowing the females weren't out to surprise him with pranks. Kirra smiled brightly when she saw him and skipped the last few steps and then jumped to land in front of him with an absolutely wicked smirk. "Morning Harry!"

/ Morning Prince! ./ The greeting was echoed by the young female wolf. Harry bowed slightly to her and the wolf's tail wagged in delight. / I like him/ she declared.

"This is Legacy," Kirra introduced the two. "She is the only female born to Lady Ash before she died." Harry had been taught the History (however brief) of Jaenelle's court first and so knew vaguely that Lady Ash was a Kindred wolf who had been one of the first to return to Jaenelle after the incident. No one had deemed fit to explain the incident until Jaenelle had gotten furious at them and told Harry herself what had happened. It had been hard for him to hear her repeat such horrors and he did not want to know details just as much as she did not want to give them. They had agreed that perhaps certain things could be left unsaid.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Lady Legacy." He was amused when the female's ears pricked forwards and she hid slightly behind Kirra's legs. Kirra smirked.

"Legacy is a natural born Healer," she informed him. "As well as a Queen." Harry was certain that, if she could, Legacy would have blushed when he sent her an impressed smile and a second bow.

Kirra giggled and tilted her head to the wolf. They shared a silent communication and Legacy bumped her head playfully against Kirra's knees before sending a brief feeling of delight along a psychic thread and darting off down the hall. Harry watched her go with a raised brow before turning to Kirra. She shrugged and motioned he follow. They fell into step beside one another and Kirra began to talk.

"Apparently Shadow's dislike of you has spurned the Kindred's acceptance. They are of the opinion that Shadow is simply too male for his own good sometimes and that they needed to send someone to test you. They sent Legacy because she is a Queen and most of the Kindred liked Lady Ash. If she approves, which she does wholeheartedly, they may just agree to help you out with your training."

"More training?" He hadn't intended it to come out as a groan, but it had. He was grateful for Kirra's help with the whole Blood thing and

learning Craft. It was so much easier to accept his instincts because he knew that was what they were: instincts. He couldn't change them any more than he could bring his parents back. Knowing that, although they separated him from most of his peers, they weren't strange or abnormal took a great load off his mind. The very idea that in Kaeleer he wasn't anyone special (indeed, he wasn't even formally serving a court - though Kirra and her mother seemed to claim males without one either way) was liberating. Certainly, he could still feel Voldemort's annoyance leak through their link with just as much force as when he was on Earth but with a multitude of activities to throw himself into he was able to forget the pain quickly.

Kirra gave him an amused look. "Just more of what KaeAskavi and Kaelas have been working on. Nothing too difficult." Harry stared at her incredulously for a moment before shaking his head. Only Kirra and Jaenelle seemed to share that opinion. The name 'Della' had been mentioned several times in concern to KaeAskavi but the Arcerian had simply given a slow arrogant cat-smirk and lazily explained. Della was his first human friend. He had helped his mother raise the girl for some time and then had made it a point to visit her throughout what he called her 'kitten-hood' to be sure that she was happy and healthy. Now that she was married he didn't see her as much but that was only because Della was a Blood female and not a Queen. He didn't and couldn't hold claim to her after she had acquired a 'mate' but he could remain friends. He still visited every now and then but mostly sent messages to her through the other Kindred. Almost all were willing to help the son of Ladvarian's best friend and apparently vied for the chance to visit the female whenever a message was mentioned. KaeAskavi found it all highly amusing but he had confided privately to Harry (male-to-male and all that jazz) that he didn't really like being known as Ladvarian's best friend's kitten. He liked his sire and all, but it wasn't as satisfying as being respected for being KaeAskavi.

Kirra wasn't like that. That was the general consensus of the younger population. She never asked for family names and she most certainly did not care if a child was a bastard or not. Harry had gleaned that to be a bastard was a horrible thing in their society, something that made the child lower-than-low simply on principle, and had agreed that Kirra was indeed special.

Several complaints had rose from that. The Lady was special too, they had declared reverently. The Lady was the special dream but Kirra was a special dream too. The Lady knew that Kirra was a special dream (because the Lady knew everything, he was informed primly) but the others didn't know. They assumed it was Draca's tutelage that made her special. Kirra was special because she was Kirra. Just like KaeAskavi was special because he was KaeAskavi. Harry wasn't sure he quite understood the last explanation but agreed with it simply because he had felt the need in the Kindred that he understand the importance of the feisty witch.

"So how are you feeling this morning?" Kirra continued, breaking into his thoughts.

He looked over at her curiously. Was she, perhaps, in on whatever sneak attack the males had planned for him? After deciding it was best not to leave a Black Widow Queen hanging for an answer he responded, "Better than normal since I was woken up at the ungodly hour of...whenever dawn happens to be." He heard her laugh and grinned to himself. "Seriously though, I think they're out to get me today."

"What makes you say that?" Normally he wouldn't have paid much attention to the response. That was because normally she said those words playfully and mischievously because she was the one hiding something. Now, however, her words were sharp and concerned. He gave her a funny half-glance to be sure she wasn't tricking him. She was frowning at him intently instead.

With a little shrug of his shoulders (something he would have been scolded for had Saetan been around to see it - and praised for by the coven who were of the opinion Saetan needed to slouch more) he replied. "Because I wasn't woken up at dawn. Daemonar always wakes me up at dawn and he hasn't been anywhere near my room since yesterday morning."

"Oh." Lips were curled into a satisfied smirk. "That's because today we're giving you a break. We - that is to say, Daemonar, Lucien, you and I - are going to visit Earth and make an appearance before the

Order and the like. I never actually told anyone I was taking you anywhere (honestly, I've heard the stories they have about grandpapa! Though they all forget how to spell his name properly...) So they're probably all worried - Sirius, Molly and Dumbledore excused of course - but not all of your friends are bound to believe just three adults when those adults are dead-set on not telling them anything. Besides," this last was chirped cheerfully, "after the scolding the males got last night for not properly easing you into the idea of the long-lived races, or at least giving the females warning, they weren't going to even attempt anything on you today. Did you know papa got himself kicked out of mama's bed for the first time since she was pregnant with Lucien?" Harry froze for a moment. Shit. All of Daemon's examples included Jaenelle and it was obvious he loved to love her (Harry still squirmed sometimes during his recounts). If it was because of him that Daemon got kicked out...

"Oh?"

"Not because of you - though I suppose that just gave her an excuse. She told papa it was because Kaelas thought he was hogging Jaenelle all to himself and he wanted a turn. Nobody seems to argue with Kaelas..." The usual note of confusion was absent from her voice and Harry knew that she understood perfectly well why nobody argued with Kaelas or KaeAskavi; she just enjoyed watching others squirm while they tried to find a way to word why without offending her or the 'kitties'.

Harry gave a sigh of relief and shared a smirk with her. Eventually the plans she mentioned from earlier sunk in fully and he froze again.

"We're bringing WHO to Earth?"

Hermione's morning started out as it always did. She woke up early and washed up and got dressed before going down to the kitchen for breakfast. Eventually the rest of the habitants of the house woke up and Mrs. Weasley was distracted by them enough that Hermione could escape the kitchen with her latest book to some quiet corner. She would read until someone found her or else pointed her out and she was dragged into the cleaning. Not that she minded, as it did help Kreacher, but she certainly didn't have to like it.

Kirra had talked with her a little about SPEW after she first heard Hermione mention it. The other girl had seemed genuinely interested in house elves and what Hermione thought about how they were forced into slavery. But Kirra was a full-blooded witch of the Blood. She was the race that gave birth to their breed of magic and the reason those witches and wizards with that little bit more now possessed the Jewels. Hermione was surprised that Mrs Weasley and Kirra had bothered to share any information with her but Kirra had told her that Hermione was Blood too. Hermione had asked how it was possible but Kirra had just shrugged. "Blood sings to Blood", she had said, as though it explained everything.

Hermione had asked if she would be able to get Jewels as well. Kirra had looked hesitant to say anything after that but she had continued nonetheless. Hermione was Blood, but Kirra wasn't sure if she was strong enough to wear the Jewels. They had given her a birthright ceremony and Kirra had smiled at her when she showed her the shimmery white stone. White was the lightest of the jewels but it made her a witch and it was something she should be proud of. Muggleborns shouldn't have had enough power to wear jewels. Not because they were weaker, she was assured the moment she had begun to get upset, but because their magical ancestry didn't go back far enough for them to have enough Blood in them to wear them. It was a great accomplishment.

Hermione played with the jewel that hung on the white-gold chain. The gold held just a hint of color, which made it something close to a metallic-ivory in appearance, and it complimented the smallish pale jewel. Kirra had given her a book on basic Craft and spells and she had become very attached to the literature. Although she had been told that Kirra wasn't going to be able to give her any more books about Craft as she wasn't powerful enough to manage much more than what the book covered, she still wished that Kirra would share a little more.

Once Kirra had satisfied her curiosity about house elves and Hermione had satisfied hers about the Blood (for the time being anyways) the two had gotten together for a last discussion before Kirra had said she needed to go back and make an appearance with the muggles her family had hired to act as her parents while she was

on Earth. They had talked about house elves and Kirra had shared her newly formed view on them and Hermione's SPEW.

She agreed that wizards should be made aware of the horrible treatment the elves received and even of the slavery they were forced to endure. But she had thought that Hermione should also take into account the elves that served happily. There were house elves that, although they weren't paid or given vacations or anything, were treated well and enjoyed their work. She had suggested very politely and with a little humour that house elves were a lot like the males she grew up with. They seemed to take it as an offence when a female could ask them for help and chose not to; house elves were the same. Hermione had agreed that house elves who were happy serving where they were would be taken into account in her next push with SPEW (how could she not, after reading the thick book about the Blood?).

She returned from her musings to her book which, for once, had absolutely nothing to do with school. It was a novel Kirra had brought back for her when she had been suffering from her time of the month and was surrounded by nothing but boys (Ginny and Mrs Weasley had been at the Burrow for the week, making sure that it was clean and that nobody had left anything important behind). It was a rather good read even if it was a little explicit in some scenes. The other girl had blushed when she had mentioned it to her and said that all the females in the coven had read that book and they felt that it should be shared as well. The males called it the 'sniffle book' and tended to leave them alone the moment the book came out. She said it would be a good defence should she ever bring any of the males in her family to visit. Hermione liked the gift but found it wasn't near as comforting a read as it could be when she wasn't having her moonsblood than it was when she was having it. She blamed hormones and Kirra agreed.

She heard Mrs Black's portrait begin to screech when someone entered the house but paid it little heed as she continued to comfort herself with the novel at hand. She heard several shouts and cries but figured it wasn't really worth the effort to try and get up. After her Birthright Ceremony her time of the month had become even worse than she could ever remember it being. She was just grateful she

wasn't a dark jeweled witch like Kirra (who had assured her that the moment she figured out how her brother and cousin made those moontime brews she was going to bring a large supply of with her back to Earth) whose moonsblood must have been even worse with her darker and deeper well of power.

"Hello." She jumped and squeaked in surprise at the smooth cultured voice. She shot a furious look over at the speaker and she promptly narrowed her eyes to give a scolding.

"Don't sneak up on people like that! It's rude!" Not to mention she really didn't want some male she didn't know to see the title and picture on the cover of her book (it was a bit risque no matter where it came from). When she managed to discern that the male had absorbed her scold she continued on more politely. "I'm Hermione Granger, may I ask who you are?"

"I am Lucien Daemon SaDiablo." The green-gold eyes sparkled in repressed amusement and he moved with the grace of a cat to stand closer to her. The black robes he wore parted to reveal a striking crimson and Hermione almost blushed when she noticed the lean body that the male bore with seductive confidence. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance Ms Granger." He gently took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles, this time successfully causing her to blush as he held her gaze, before he let her retract her hand hastily. The flash of black on his finger caught her attention and she stared at it for a brief second before she recognized it for what it was.

His lips curled in amusement and he slipped off his ring and played with it for a moment, watching her follow its movement warily. "I take it from your expression that you know what this is..."

"And what you are." She was annoyed at his tone. He made it sound as though it was amusing she knew what he was - like it was surprising. Her next words were frostier than she would have liked them to be but he was being entirely too arrogant than he should have been (never mind she had barely spoken to him). "You are a Black Jeweled Warlord Prince who is the son of Saetan Daemon SaDiablo the second, also called Daemon Sadi, and Jaenelle SaDiablo, formally Angeline. You have a cousin named Daemonar

Yaslana who is the son of Lucivar and Marian Yaslana, Lucivar being Daemon's brother. You also have a sister, Kirra," she inserted a pointed glare here, "who happens to be the one who told me about you in the first place."

He stopped playing with his ring and was regarding her with a strange expression playing in his eyes though his face remained impassive. He slipped the ring back to its place and offered an apologetic smile while bowing. "My apologies for being presumptuous."

Hermione was taken aback by the quickness in which he recognized the reason for her anger and delivered the appropriate (more than appropriate, really) apology. She felt a flush creep up her neck and guilt bubble to the surface at taking his tone quite so seriously. "It's alright," she told him, shifting in her seat slightly when a brief pang of discomfort flared. "I shouldn't have overreacted."

He regarded her silently while she shifted again, trying to find the position that best alleviated the beginnings of a dull throb in her lower abdomen. His nostrils flared a few times and his eyes narrowed. "You have your moonsblood? And they've left you unprotected?"

She glowered at him. "This house is full of fully grown witches and wizards and is protected by thousands of years worth of wards and enchantments. I don't exactly call that unprotected."

"I do." She gaped at him and he continued to glare around the room. Reevaluating its worth now that he knew its sole occupant was also a witch on her moontime. When he next set his gaze on her he motioned to the chair opposite her. "May I?"

She nodded slowly and he crossed to the piece of furniture and sat down, relaxing outwardly while his eyes remained steady, alert, and focussed. The book in her lap caught his attention and he stiffened, narrowing his gaze. "What?" she asked, following his line of sight and smirking inwardly.

He stared at her for a long moment before he lazily shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing. That's an interesting book. Any particular passages you enjoyed?" She saw the wicked suggestion behind his

eyes and willed herself not to react since he hadn't actually said anything snippy about it. You must not hex him, became a silent mantra in the back of his mind.

"What brings you to Headquarters?" Hermione finally asked, setting the books aside after marking her place.

"My darling sister got the entire coven angry at the rest of my family for failing to mention to a certain Mr Harry Potter that our family is one of the long-lived races and by long-lived we mean..."

"Long-lived," she finished for him amusedly. Kirra had mentioned (though Hermione didn't think she was aware of the fact) that she was planning on getting Harry trained properly soon. When the two disappeared around the same time, it hadn't been hard to put two and two together.

He smirked arrogantly. "Exactly. He didn't take it too well so she's brought him back here for the day and tomorrow morning we're taking him back to continue training." Something flashed across his face. "Ah, father might be disappointed."

"Why would he be disappointed?"

"He was enjoying passing on his particular brand of Craft skills to Harry." The suggestion in his voice was evident and Hermione blushed when she thought of what Harry must be going through. She was almost a year older than him, though in the same year at school, and so she had learned about that before he ever did. The poor boy was so hopelessly innocent when it came to those things... and after what Kirra had mentioned about her father... "Should I be surprised to know that you understand what I mean?"

"You shouldn't be," she murmured, avoiding meeting his gaze. "I've practically memorized the book Kirra gave me."

He laughed. It was a smooth, deep sound that reverberated from his chest and up through his throat where it was coated with a sort of seductive throb. "So you're the one." Amusement coated his voice as he withheld chuckles. "She compared your love of reading to our

cousin's love of weapons - which I'm sure you can guess is quite a bit."

Hermione blushed. He took in her rosy appearance with an expression of delight and amusement.

"Lucien?" A dark-haired male entered the room and immediately Hermione felt a shiver deep down in the Abyss, below the reach of her White jewel. The second male rustled the huge bat-like wings on his back nervously. "Right. Just checking." Before he left the room. The male across from her smiled and she fingered her jewel nervously.

"You shouldn't even think about using that right now."

"I understand what a moontime is, thank you," she snapped. He shrugged lazily and smirked apologetically. How he managed that one she'd never know.

"...so really that's why we decided to come back. We would have -" Kirra winced right in the middle of her sentence and Daemonar came back into the room. The vest he wore had two long slits down the back for his wings and was cut at the front with simple toggles. He looked slightly pale and smirked faintly at his younger cousin.

"Best not bother that one and his new friend. You're going to have a hell of a time dragging him out of here tomorrow." Kirra nodded slowly. "Use the Queen look. I think he'll still listen to the Queen look."

Kirra and Daemonar shared a long knowing look before Kirra turned back to the assembled adults. Harry shifted to catch Daemonar's eye. The two males turned inwards for a brief psychic conversation before Harry's eyes widened and his glasses slipped down his nose. He pushed them up hastily and smiled reassuringly at a wary Kirra.

Mrs Weasley stared at the three Blood sternly before she relented. "Are you hungry, dears? You're looking a bit peaky Harry..."

Kirra smiled to herself as soon even Daemonar was surprised with the mothering she was administering. / Is she for real? Not even mum

mothers me this much... / He sent on a psychic thread, spear to distaff.

Kirra giggled in reply. / She the mother of 7 and a hearth witch. It's a lovely combination, don't you agree? ./

She received a dirty look over a plate of food in response while Mrs Weasley twirled her wand and tried desperately not to reach out and shorten his hair.

TBC...

Chapter#6

He didn't trust any of them. He wanted to kill them all for looking at her. Had it not been for his cousin and little Queen he might have risen to the killing edge. But he hadn't because Kirra had scolded him in her Queen voice for being a prick and a bastard and neglecting his duties as her Escort - a position that had only been entrusted to him by Shadow because the wolf had been upset with the other Kindred for liking Harry and because Daemonar was already coming as her Guard.

So he hadn't gone to sleep.

In hindsight, it probably wasn't the best idea. He had been aware of everything in the house the entire night and had been tense because the scent of a witch on her moonsblood had drifted through the halls. It was really only because Kirra had erected a Black barrier around the room the other witch was staying in that he was able to stop himself from sitting guard outside her room the entire night. Daemonar had put a Grey lock on the room, not that Lucien couldn't get past it but it served as a reminder that there was another Warlord Prince in the room who was guarding a Queen and he didn't feel up to fighting through a Grey Jeweled Warlord Prince and his Queen to get to the witch he wanted.

"Cousin?" Daemonar yawned and stretched his wings as far as they could go as he stumbled into the kitchen. He tucked them against his sides to allow Kirra to stumble in and glare at nothing in particular.

"Coffee," she demanded. Mrs Weasley chuckled softly and passed her a steaming mug. The girl grunted softly and accepted the morning offering before slumping into a chair and brooding over the white china.

"What is it bastard?" He ducked the not so subtle blow to his head and summoned a chair to come to his older cousin's side.

"Prick," he grumbled half-heartedly. Then he continued: "You okay?"

"I'm alive.," he drawled, meeting the gold-eyed stare of the Eyrien.

"Ah." He accepted the offered mug of coffee. "So you mean you're going to be bitter and glare-y all week?"

"No. He means he's going to trick Harry into letting him prod around his memories of a certain witch and then he's going to mope around the Hall while plotting the seduction of a female who isn't even of legal age yet," Kirra informed her winged cousin cheerfully. Her empty mug of coffee sat on the table and her eyes were glimmering with far more alertness than they had been only minutes before.

Lucien glowered at his sister and cousin. They both wore knowing smirks that they dropped when more sleepy occupants slipped into the room. Lucien felt something twist inside him when the bushy-haired witch entered alongside a red-haired male. Kirra shot him a warning look and casually called the female over to talk. He felt his cousin grab his shoulder under the pretence of telling him some interesting anecdote.

"Calm down, alright?" Daemonar muttered. "We don't need to deal with you going all Warlord Prince of doom on us." Apparently Daemonar had spent a few too many hours tagging along in Kirra's mind when she went touring Earth. It was the only place he could have gotten that 'so-an-so of doom' comment.

"Good morning Harry!" Kirra beamed at her Warlord Prince. He blinked several times at the sight of Daemonar and Lucien muttering to themselves and staring at Kirra and Hermione. He let his gaze turn to Kirra and smiled faintly. "When will you be ready to return to Kaeleer?"

"Preferably never if it gets me out of the Talk but after breakfast if you want a real answer." He grinned cheekily at her.

"Prickly little thing, aren't you?" she muttered, lips twitching in amusement.

"Seriously though, it's like he just pokes me with evilness and then runs off again...bloody wanker..." Kirra was howling with laughter and her unofficial escort, Shadow, growled in warning, unsure about why

his Lady was making those funny noises. "I don't know how you find this funny."

"I'm sorry." She had stopped laughing but her giggles hadn't subsided. "It's just... I've heard him be described to me hundreds of times but I've never heard him described like some deranged ten-year old playing 'Nicky Nicky Nine-Doors' with your head." She snickered for a few minutes and Harry grinned at her while focussing on staying sitting above the lake.

Yes. Above the lake. Kirra had decided to teach him air-walking but didn't think he would be able to manage it the normal way without some incentive. She'd tried every bribe she could think of and had even threatened him a few times but he hadn't been able to manage it. Finally she had glowered at him and informed him that desperate times called for desperate measures...

...So she'd dragged him above a lake in Glacia and told him to 'feel the ground' before letting go.

Needless to say, he wasn't willing to go for a dip in a Glacian lake when winter was approaching in a few months (not that the lakes were any warmer in summer). He'd grasped the concept amazingly quickly after that.

So now she was ensuring that he could hold himself in air and they were sitting on air ten feet above the icy water, talking about his scar and why Legacy was so upset with his sleeping habits and why she thought that she was losing her healing abilities. Harry had been unwilling to explain such a foreign concept as a curse-scar to one of the simpler-minded Kindred and so Legacy had primly informed him that she would get Kirra and Harry would explain to Kirra for Kirra to translate for the Kindred.

"I've never thought I'd hear Voldemort described as a deranged ten-year old," he muttered, smirking wryly.

"I should start up a puppet show or something..."

Harry snickered and his glasses slipped down his nose. Kirra grinned cheekily and prodded him in the chest. He toppled off his air perch and scrambled to regain his seat a few feet below. Kirra floated up higher to avoid his lunge. "Slippery thing, air. You never know when it'll up and let you drop."

"So says the one who pushed me in the first place."

"I didn't push. I gave you a helpful, non-verbal, suggestion that you need to keep your focus on extending the ground all around you." He scowled at her but she was unperturbed. "I'm serious. You're the first person I've ever met who has managed to learn air-walking without having to get mama to show them. You've got a lot of potential but that ridiculous school is dead set on telling you that everything I'm trying to teach you is impossible or else is Dark Magic...like that's a bad thing." She huffed softly and he rolled his eyes.

"Well I'm sorry I've never been told enough to formulate a proper opinion on anything."

"As well you should be."

"And why is that, little one?" Shadow snarled angrily and snapped at Lucien as Kirra's elder brother came striding up towards them with a curious expression. He wore a deep blue-green tunic and his eyes glinted from behind tinted glasses (for the snowblindness he was unused to, unlike his constantly-roaming sister).

"Shush, Shadow," she scolded absently, twining her fingers into his scruff. "He's never formulated a proper opinion of anything and I've said he should be sorry for it." She beamed. "What brings you to my icy neck of the realm Lucien?"

"Ah," he grinned and ruffled her already spiky hair, making it stand even more on end, "mother and father want your pet prince back for his lesson on Craft. And you, my darling little sister, are to go with Daemonar to visit a certain love-deprived pack of hell hounds... on grandfather's orders of course."

"Do grandpapa's orders mean he might have been grouching about them or grandpapa called you and specifically requested said visit?"

"Ah...the former."

She grinned. "Then let's get going! Harry, catch the Sapphire and you'll get back in no time. Buh bye!" She ruffled his hair and vanished as she latched onto the Winds and began the meticulous leap through the Darkness to the Keep.

Her brother scowled at empty air. "I wish she wouldn't do that."

"Why not?" Harry questioned curiously. No one had deemed it necessary to explain any of the odd things Kirra did that went against the lessons he was being taught, but he figured once more wouldn't hurt. He wasn't disappointed.

"Strictly speaking, the Blood aren't supposed to make blind leaps through the Darkness and they aren't supposed to leap between Realms. But Kirra just... she just does those things naturally. Until mother and Draca got to her she was doing all the same things mother did as a child. Mother doesn't do them as often any more, ever since grandfather showed her the Gates, but Kirra seems set on being sure she doesn't forget how to do either. She says it keeps her in shape to jump between realms ever once in awhile." Lucien drew his lips back in a grim sort of smile. "It's rather bad luck that I am unable to accompany her to this school of yours."

"Yeah...wait, what?"

"She was sent a letter, it apologises for the lateness but the owls were unable to find her when her name appeared in the register." He shrugged. "She originally went to Earth because she said she felt the confusion. She found a very determined flock of owls who also happened to have a few Kindred in their midst - all of them determined to deliver a letter to her. Some of the letters were a couple years old and unreadable. But there was one of the Kindred who was the leader of their little flock who had the first letter ever sent and it was in good condition. Apparently the Kindred had been

sending pleas into the Darkness when they failed to find her. It was their confusion and pain at failing their duty that called to Kirra."

"So...she's a witch and a witch?" He furrowed his brow. "How is she going to manage that?"

"She's read through and memorized every book on each list and she's gone to the school and talked to the teachers. She got herself a wand - or rather, she made one herself - and asked to take whatever major tests or exams were necessary in order for her to attend this year. She's passed with flying colours...better really because she told them that she'd only spent about a year learning everything." Lucien nodded towards the landing web and the translucent landing crystal that wasn't that far off. "We're almost there."

"Ya. So...how does her Offering work now? I mean, does she make it when she comes of age on Earth, at seventeen, or when she comes of age here?" He regarded Kirra's brother out of the corner of his vision. "It will be hard for her to have full legal rights on Earth and still have to wait here. Speaking from a teenager's point of view," he assured when he caught the brotherly frown Lucien was sending him.

"I don't know..." Lucien sighed. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, I suppose."

"Not unless Kirra decides to jump that too." He grinned and caught the Wind before Lucien could register the comment and give him the 'what-did-you-just-say-you-puny-little-nothing?' look Harry got whenever he teased the elder male.

Nearly two weeks of constant training still wouldn't make him proficient enough to even be considered a threat to Kirra or her relatives while wielding a bladed Eyrien stick. Kirra had said he was definitely proficient enough to kill a fair number of Death Eaters or weapons masters back on Earth but he failed to see how that worked. If his instructors had needed to slow down and purposely weaken their blows in order to teach him then how was he proficient enough to do any of what Kirra suggested?

"It's because you only have us to compare yourself to." Harry jumped and looked up at Lucien as he settled down beside Harry. "Let's face

it, we've been training since before we could walk and you've done nothing of the sort in your entire life. You've picked it up nicely though," he shot a sidelong look at the bespectacled boy, "a lot better than some of the beginners my sister has brought to us before."

"I can't even move and you expect me to believe that I can defeat anyone?" Harry demanded, wincing when he brought his arm up.

"Ah well, perhaps not at the moment." Lucien was smothering his usual smirk, Harry could tell. "But once you've gone through father's last session before you leave..." He smirked now and it was a predatory thing, "then you'll be a force back home."

Harry nodded and then yawned. A whine drew his attention to the ash-grey wolf standing off to the side giving him disapproving looks. / You promised to take easy walkies and not train, after last time/ she accused him. He grinned sheepishly and Legacy huffed in annoyance, even if her tail swung lazily in affection.

"I'm sorry. I won't do it again," he promised solemnly. Legacy sniffed disbelievingly before trotting to his side and making soft gentle noises while licking his wounds and bruises. They began to heal under her ministrations and Lucien raised one elegant brow while his lips twitched in amusement.

"Legacy has taken quite a liking to you," he commented offhandedly.

/ That is because Harry listens to healers better than Prince Lucien/ Legacy growled succinctly. / He took easy walkies for whole day. Prince Lucien went for fighting right after he woke up. /

"Lucien!" Harry pressed a hand to his chest as though shocked and appalled. "How could you undermine the pretty healer's work like that?" Legacy gave a soft growl-grumble of embarrassment and returned to her work on Harry while ignoring the amused teasing look Kirra's brother was giving her.

"I think someone has chosen a Queen," Lucien teased.

"Oh really? Who?" Both males gave innocent looks to Kirra when she dropped down from above the Hall to land near the bench Harry was sprawled across.

"Harry and Legacy," Lucien replied promptly.

"Well that would make sense..." Kirra looked thoughtful. "If Legacy still wants to be a part of my Court when I'm ready then Harry could serve her while indirectly serving me which would be excellent because I'll be tagging along to Hogwarts with you anyways."

"You're like mother, Kirra," Lucien grumbled. "You talk about this as if you get any decision in who goes into your court. They're choosing you, not the other way around."

"Well it would be the kind thing to do to allow me my illusions," she snapped, giving an annoyed look. "Grandpapa allows me my illusions and so does papa."

"That is because mother is optimistic and still believes you have a chance at choosing of your own free will," he replied with a lazy, satisfied smirk.

"...oh bugger off."

Daemonar followed Kirra as she walked easily through muggle London. She had made a rather wonderful bit of illusion to hid his wings so to everyone they passed it just appeared he was wearing his usual leather pants and vest - minus the slits for his wings of course - as well as steel-toed boots. The Grey jewel that hung on a chain around his neck was tucked beneath his vest, nestled warm against his skin, while the one on his ring was visible.

His younger cousin smiled cheerfully at the muggles they passed, bidding them good morning and the like. The young male who was arranging flowers outside a small grocery smiled at her and held out a white carnation. She accepted it and pecked his cheek, laughing lightly when he raised a brow and muttered something before she drew away. Daemonar nudged her when she fell back into step with him.

"Who was he?"

"His grandmother runs the grocery and he helps her out on weekends," she replied easily. "His name is Jason and he was just thanking me for showing him this great club close to his new apartment - he's got himself a new boyfriend!" Her grin turned absolutely terrible and Daemonar simply stared before shaking his head slowly.

"Why didn't I see that coming?"

"Because you thought I was on good behaviour." She shrugged. "Who knows? You're male."

"I'd nearly forgotten."

"Then aren't you glad I was here to remind you?" she shot back. They walked down the street for awhile longer before Kirra suddenly stopped. She tilted her head at his questioning look and he followed the direction she had indicated with golden eyes.

Looking run-down and filthy, the pub had definitely seen better days. A swinging sign above the door read 'The Leaky Cauldron' but there was something about the place that seemed...off. Daemonar felt something tug at his mind and then he puzzled over the place he knew the pub was supposed to be. No matter how hard he tried with his usual sight, he couldn't keep his eyes on the spot he wanted. They kept drifting off to the side to some other building that suddenly looked more interesting than it had moments before.

He was ready to unleash a burst of his Grey strength when Kirra threw out her arm to stop him. "Don't."

"Why not?" he hissed. "I don't appreciate having my eyesight ruined like that by some illusion."

"It's not just for you, it's for anyone who doesn't possess magic or know of its existence. The illusion won't affect you once you've been shown the secret it hides. Don't try and meddle with their wards and

they won't meddle with your wings when I drop the illusion around them inside the alley."

It went against his nature for him to accept that he was going to be manipulated by foreign magic, foreign Craft, and be helpless (even only slightly) for a time. But Kirra gave him the Queen look and ordered him to follow her in her Queen voice. He went and nearly sighed in relief when the place came into clear view again and he felt the tug of the strange magic leave his mind. Kirra offered a stern stare around at the few lingering patrons before tugging him along to a small room with a brick wall. She reached out and tapped a few of the bricks in sequence before they began to peel back.

Slowly they straightened around the edges until finally they created an archway that opened onto a long, crowded and very strange alley-street. Figures of all shapes and sizes in robes of all colours and patterns crowded everywhere. Cries of strange animals and bursts of light and colour were everywhere and it was all he could do to restrain himself from lunging. He thought of his cousin, Lucien, and how he would remain calm no matter what the situation. Kirra removed his illusion and he shuffled his wings noisily, happy to keep them looser than the tight-pinned position he had been required to keep them so that they wouldn't brush up against the landens...er, muggles. She wrapped him in a tight skin of her dark power and fixed him with a look that told him he would remain on his best behaviour or else.

She led him along the street, ignoring the strange goings on. He observed it from a warrior's perspective and immediately decided he hated it. It ran on a diagonal and with all the strange shapes of the buildings and the stands in the street it made manoeuvring hard and whenever someone taller came along it also obstructed his clear view. His fingers itched to call in his Eyrien war blades but Kirra pinched him and glared. He submitted to the Queen look and offered a smile when his cousin was the one glaring.

She stopped in front of a large and imposing white building. Something was written in another language across the entrance but Kirra paid it no heed as she motioned he follow and walked through the doors. Daemonar followed, already wary of the place and even

more so when he felt the thrum of old spells and Craft flicker around him.

Ugly little things with wrinkled skin and horrible red uniforms scurried about at the height of his knees. He stared at them with unconcealed curiosity and disgust while Kirra simply skipped along delightedly to an open booth where one of the little creatures sat waiting.

"Good morning Blackjaw," she chirped, digging into her pocket and withdrawing a golden key on a sturdy chain that had previously been clipped to her belt. "I've brought more fun for my account." The little creature grinned, fangs bared in a delightedly feral way.

"Of course Kirra. Gringotts is always happy to help you. Anything of particular interest you've brought for us today?" The goblin spoke with a sneer even if he spoke politely. You couldn't very well expect a goblin to change his nature just because Kirra was who she was. Kirra smiled wickedly and trotted along after Blackjaw as he led them through several hallways and to an office.

Daemonar shrugged indifferently when Kirra asked to meet with the goblin in private. Inside he was trying very hard not to growl at the thought of leaving his little Queen cousin alone with an unknown but he accepted it after she gave him a half-quizzical look. She knew of his nature and she would remain confused about his reaction for as long as she trusted the one she was going with. He nodded at her and she smiled before she followed the goblin into the office and shut the door.

Even with the shields she placed around the room upon the door's closure, Daemonar could feel the gentle plucking of power in the Abyss below the level of his Grey jewel. He sighed and grunted softly when he felt Kirra shove his attention away with a Black aural shield. With a grumble of annoyance he turned his attention to glaring moodily at the passing goblins.

One of them paused when he spotted the Eyrien standing outside the door. It scowled at him and then stared in disbelief at the nameplate on the door. "Blackjaw is actually helping a wizard?" he sneered. Daemonar growled.

"He's helping my cousin and you'd do best to keep your trap shut about it." The goblin glowered at the tone Daemonar used before smirking.

"At least he hasn't lowered himself to serving those who aren't worthy."

Daemonar regarded him warily, a growl still bubbling in his throat. Finally, he smirked. "Maybe goblins aren't so bad."

"Wizards are still unworthy."

"Good thing we're not wizards then; we're Blood."

The goblin smirked wickedly. "In that case I hope we see more of you around Gringotts. We have missed having a proper magical being in this Realm."

"We'll see."

Dumbledore was annoyed. Very few things warranted the elder wizard's annoyance but right now he was annoyed. He paced his study at Hogwarts, as he was wont to do, and furiously checked the hundreds of shining instruments and things that littered his office. A glinting Red jewel hung on a gold chain around his neck and he drew on its power to try and find the whereabouts of a certain Mr Potter. He growled softly to himself when he failed to feel the particular twisted brand of Craft that was Harry's magical signature.

He blamed the girl. The girl whose name had originally just been one of many names that were prospective students for his school. The girl who, for some reason he did not know, failed to receive any of the letters that were sent. The very same girl who had appeared in his Headquarters out of the blue and had felt that completely bypassing the Fidelius charm he had placed over the house to be perfectly normal and acceptable behaviour. He could remember the night very well...

Flashback

It was the usual sort of meeting. Reports of Harry's actions while staying with his Aunt. Albus had been disconcerted that the boy had been leaving the property, even if just for morning runs, because it spoke of training on his own - out of Dumbledore's control - and that was not a pleasant thought, knowing what he did. But Dumbledore could not allow his Order to sense his unease so he had breezed over that part of their meeting and moved onto more important things.

They spoke of getting more members to join them and Kingsley Shacklebolt had mentioned a few Aurors who had expressed discontent with the current Ministry and that brought Albus's mood up some. After settling a glaring match and smoothing over the customary biting comments from Severus directed to Sirius the meeting looked to be at a close. People were packing up; Bill drew his wand to destroy the evidence of their meeting; Molly had that faraway look as she began to prepare the next day's cleaning schedule.

That was when it happened. The table had been bare and suddenly a female was sitting on it. She regarded them all curiously for a moment before her presence registered and the first curses were thrown. Instead of drawing a wand to defend herself or even conjuring a shield of some kind, the female had opened her arms to the curse and caught it. She caught a curse without even flinching.

Her brow had furrowed in thought as she turned her hands over and over again to observe the shining red ball of magic. She murmured a few things in a strange language that Albus could not recognize before she looked up at the stunned and wary crowd around her. She tilted her head for a moment, fixing her gaze firmly on Sirius and Molly before her gaze drifted over to Albus with a strange sort of intensity.

Her eyes were different. The subtle compulsion spells he wove around himself did not affect her in the least. There was no fuzzy edge to her gaze that indicated she was seeing the spells and not his true self. Those ancient eyes stared at him blankly for some time before she muttered something else and a flare of strange and foreign magic twisted around her before it settled.

"Hello," she - finally - spoke hesitantly. "Who are you?"

Moody growled and both his eyes were fixed on the female. She wore patched threadbare brown pants and a sleeveless sky-blue shirt. Her spiky white-blonde hair stuck up in all directions and her icy blue eyes glimmered in amusement at the noise of distrust that the gristly Auror made.

"Wards?" Her brow furrowed before she raised an imperious eyebrow. "You mean those basic Craft shields? I'd hardly call those wards." Her lips curled into a smirk. "Although that little web was interesting at first glance it is obvious that whoever made it failed to comprehend basic weaving. Nothing was holding it together along the outside."

Albus wasn't sure how she'd managed it, but after that first meeting she had successfully placed a seed of doubt in the minds of his Order. He strengthened his compulsion spells but they all still seemed to complain every once in awhile.

End Flashback

But this was the last straw. He could understand helping more than just him to realize their potential as Blood. He could understand the random comings and goings (she was a Queen and had duties in a fair number of Realms and Territories). He could even understand her dislike of his subtle compulsion spells and glamour charms as he used them for manipulation but this he could not understand nor tolerate.

She had taken him.

He hadn't been there for the celebrations after Harry's successful hearing but he had assumed that her presence was only because she was attached to him as her newest discovered Warlord Prince. No one had told Albus what his Birthright was and he hadn't wanted to press the issue when he knew that a furious dark jeweled Queen was on the other end.

He had only found out after she had spirited him away to a Realm none of them could reach that Harry was a Birthright Sapphire. That

was troubling news in itself, knowing that the boy was only one step below him (or above him if you were speaking from Kirra's perspective) but to also take into account that Harry had yet to go through his Offering... He had been ecstatic that their weapon was so strong.

That was when Molly had told him that Kirra had taken him away.

That girl had removed his most prized student from under his control and taken him to be taught by her own family; by the High Lord of Hell and his two sons and by her mother...formally Witch.

No, not formally. Kirra had exploded into a rage when he had even suggested that the book she had brought him was correct when it said that Witch had fallen. She had informed him in no uncertain terms that Witch still walked the Realms and would walk the Realms for as long as the flesh would allow and that she would continue to exist even when the flesh failed. Dreams Made Flesh was something that Kirra did not take lightly.

He sincerely hoped that the source of his annoyance would bring back the boy in the same condition he had been when he had left them so unceremoniously. For the sake of the wizarding world, the boy had best not have forgotten his purpose.

TBC...

Chapter#7

Kirra settled down on the ground and sighed heavily. Her mother blinked in surprise at the sudden appearance but then smiled. "Something wrong?"

"Do you know how many goblins it takes to get around fifteen years of deceptions and thefts and forgeries?" Kirra glowered at nothing in particular and her mother raised a single sculptured brow.

"No. How many?"

"One hundred and twelve." The younger girl massaged her temples and muttered several choice curses in a few languages that, while appropriately pithy, were anatomically impossible. The elder snorted in amusement while she waited for her daughter to continue. "I know I'm good with names and all but even I can't remember that many; considering who much it takes to get proper help at Gringotts I need to remember the name and face of every goblin I meet, just so that I can keep in their good graces." A soft smirk rose. "Of course, those language spells you helped me with work wonders."

"Naturally," was the pompous reply she received. The two females shared an amused look as identical grins worked their ways onto their features. "So aside from manipulative old codgers and one hundred and twelve goblins, what else has got you in this mood?"

"The letters say you can bring a pet - an animal familiar, really - with you: an owl, a cat or a toad. But you're only supposed to have one and well...Shadow is rather upset that wolves aren't on the list. KaeAskavi is delighted, of course, but I don't think that he's the definition of 'cat' that the letter meant." She shrugged. "I just don't want to be the one to break the news to any of the Kindred who believe they fall into the category of 'cat'."

"And as there are no Kindred owls or toads..."

She watched her daughter brighten considerably. "Kindred owls!" she exclaimed. She flung herself at her mother and hugged tightly. "You've given me a great idea. Thank you so much!"

"Ah...you're welcome?"

The younger Queen beamed at her mother before she caught the Winds and vanished. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed, female that was left behind shrugged while her lips curled in amusement. "Glad to have helped," she murmured to thin air.

Harry scowled at his textbook and then looked over when Hedwig gave a soft inquiring hoot. Her head tilted and then twisted as she fixed a ruffled feather before she peered at him with curious golden eyes. He sighed and set the book aside, reaching over to stroke the feathers of her chest. Her eyes closed in pleasure but she repeated the questioning noise.

"Sorry girl. It's just I was reading up on the new textbook for DADA and it doesn't look very promising." Hedwig made a short noise that spoke volumes about what she thought about the book that was causing her human distress. He grinned affectionately and she nipped at his finger gently. "I'd let you take a howler to the author but as it is I don't think you'd suffer being so near something quite so loud." Hedwig looked mildly insulted. "Not that I don't think you'd be able to get away before it went off but I know it isn't comfortable for you to fly through the darkness."

Kirra had managed (after much consulting and several loud explosions) to combine wizard magic and Craft so that it would allow the Kindred owls from Earth to manage the blind flight through the darkness and into Kaeleer. Hedwig was the only exception to this rule. Kirra had been delighted when she'd caught sight of Hedwig and after discussing it with her mother the two Queens had come to the conclusion that Hedwig was half-Blood. Not enough to be Kindred but too much to be other. It made perfect sense, when Harry thought about it; Hedwig really was far too understanding and intelligent to be a normal owl.

Harry had no doubt that Dumbledore was upset with him for running off (even if technically he had been kidnapped) to another Realm, especially since Harry was refusing to send the headmaster any information about what he was learning while in Kaeleer. Kirra had been pleased with that little tidbit, as had her family. Daemonar,

especially, had given him a feral grin and clapped him on the back approvingly, declaring in no uncertain terms that "there might be a warrior in you yet".

He felt the snowy owl shift under his hand and looked down curiously. She nuzzled against his palm happily and gave a soft whir. He chuckled and his owl looked very pleased with herself. "Of course you're right, Hedwig. I shouldn't get so annoyed." Harry thought she looked just a tad too smug.

Before, when he had first started his crash-course on the Blood, he had been allowed a few hours of each day to practise his own brand of magic and to complete his summer homework assignments. Now, after he had finished his homework, he had very little to do during his allotted time. He couldn't try out new spells, for fear if he made a mistake there was no one around to correct whatever disaster he could create, and it was pointless to continue with spells he already knew, not to mention boring. So, to alleviate his perpetual boredom, Harry had taken to reading through his textbooks and correcting things or else writing snide opinions about the content in the margins. Hedwig was always amused by this and so he made sure he spoke his thoughts aloud so that she could make her own opinion known through various indignant hoots and angry flaps of her wings.

Of course, this only really worked with his DADA texts as it was the only subject he could boast true knowledge in. Charms came second with transfiguration a close third. Potions, he couldn't place. Most of the 'spells' he was learning in Kaeleer seemed very much like potions, made by a combination of ingredients and backed with jewel Craft. When he was truly bored he began pouring through his potions books and studied them, trying to find similarities between the spells the Blood used and wizard-kind's potions. He had leant his books to Kirra and she had scowled at them for a long moment before traipsing off to conduct experiments with her mother on the subject. He was beginning to think that Snape would have a bit of trouble if Kirra ever decided to break out her increasing collection of modified potions - potions, Harry didn't doubt, would be deemed impossible on Earth.

He was also curious about why Hedwig flatly refused to deliver anything to Professor Dumbledore. The owl simply stared at him

when he told her who he was writing to and would then promptly present her back to him in obvious dismissal when he went to give it to her for delivery. He'd asked Kirra to take it with her on her frequent visits but she said that there was simply nothing he could say or do that could get her near the elderly wizard. When asked why, she had simply sniffed in disdain and changed the subject of departed under the excuse that she needed to visit the hell hounds (though Harry knew that they only really needed to be checked on once or twice a month at most).

Curiously, neither female had a problem with delivering letters to his friends. He'd tried to include letters to the headmaster through his friends but it only took one glance for them to refuse when that was his intention. He'd given up after the first few tries and decided to allow the two of them to keep Dumbledore in the dark. He's even come to appreciate the lack of short and completely uninformative notes (as they could hardly be considered letters) from the elderly wizard and no longer was upset or annoyed at his two female friends.

/ Harry? ./ Legacy trotted in the open door and gave a happy pant when she spotted him. / Are busy? ./

"No, I'm not busy," he replied. The wolf looked slightly upset. "Do you need my help for something?"

The young Healer shook out her fur before replying. / Shadow is...upset with Harry. Shadow think that Kirra like Harry more than Kirra like Shadow and Shadow is making Kindred upset too. / The female growled softly. / I not want Kindred to hurt Prince Harry so I will stay with Harry and tell Kindred to keep away. /

Harry blinked in surprise. He had been certain that he and the black wolf had already gone over this hill. Ah well, if that was the way it was... "Thanks Legacy. I appreciate the help and concern."

He felt amusement through the psychic thread. / It fun to annoy Shadow/ she replied simply. / Kindred always annoy Shadow; this just make more fun. /

"Then I won't interrupt." Kirra was beaming at the two startled occupants of the room. Only Hedwig looked appropriately unimpressed at Kirra's ability to enter a room unnoticed but, then again, Hedwig was an owl and she hadn't been in a conversation. "I had wondered at why he was so sulky and now I know why." Harry shifted over on the window seat he had taken up residence on so that the female could plop down beside him. "So... what's new?"

He sent her an amused look. "Have you finished meddling with my potions book yet?"

"No." She gave him an exasperated look. "Mama hasn't finished making her own versions of everything yet. She was particularly interested in that hangover potion..." He shook his head in mock-sadness as Kirra smirked.

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"Because it's my mother we're talking about; the one who invented Gravediggers - the drinks that got papa and Uncle Lucivar kicked out of a city." She got a faraway look in her eyes as she snickered. "Would you believe me if I told you I've witnessed the same thing happen to both of them and their sons?"

"Considering it was your family, I wouldn't doubt it."

Kirra snickered. "Well, I was actually here to tell you that papa won't be giving you the Talk tonight. He and mama are going out to see a play tonight but papa says he expects you to set aside double-time tomorrow. Mama wants me to tell you that she wants you to address a letter to this Professor Snape of yours so that she can confirm a few things and possibly get some ingredients from him that we don't have in Kaeleer." She nodded and stood, now that her message had been passed on. "Now, I've got to go visit Draca for a check-up test to be sure I still remember how all the Gates work; I wouldn't want to accidentally send someone to some far corner of Hell. Although they do have nice hot springs, I wouldn't want anyone stuck there when the hounds are hungry."

Harry, who had met the pack of hell hounds and had discovered exactly why it was important that Kirra visit and remind them who they couldn't attack, agreed with her.

Saetan observed the stern-looking woman from afar. He was wrapped in a sight shield and walking a few inches above the ground. She was making a list of responses and copying a new letter when she came upon a sceptic response. Thin square-rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of her nose as she peered down at the parchment with a cursory but careful look. After a moment more of observing her Saetan dropped his shield and stepped lightly to the floor. His shoes clicked on the stone and the woman looked over quickly - the only indication she had been startled.

"May I help you?" she asked, her lips in a thin line that betrayed her annoyance at being caught off-guard. He offered her a charming smile in the hopes that perhaps she would stop looking at him as though she wanted nothing more than to leave the room.

"Ah, you might have met my granddaughter, Kirra...?" Her features softened fractionally and she inclined her head. He continued: "She was planning to come and deliver her acceptance in person but regretfully was drawn away on business. I have come in her stead."

"I see." The woman made a note on her list and looked up again. "You must be Saetan S.D. then. I am Minerva McGonagall." Amusement glimmered in her eyes. "Perhaps it is a good thing you came instead of Kirra... There is a running theory over what the initials she uses for her last name are, would you care to enlighten me? It would certainly be something I would wish to be able to inform the rest of the staff of."

Saetan chuckled. Despite her obvious age she had the same wicked streak that he had come to know in the Kaeleer Queens. It was rather amusing and gratifying at the same time. "I would love to be the one to tell you but unfortunately I would have to explain my ruining my granddaughter's fun to both her and to my daughter and that is something I do not look forward to."

The woman - Minerva - laughed and smiled wryly. "Yes, that would be a bit of a problem, wouldn't it? If you don't mind me saying, your granddaughter is certainly a befuddling child."

Thinking back on when he and Geoffrey had been silent in hopes of not confronting the wayward female he smiled and tipped his head. "That she is," he murmured. "That she is."

He was a Warlord Prince and he wasn't supposed to be this nervous. He had been training non-stop for nearly three weeks now (well he actually still had five days before he attained that particular period of time, but who was counting?) and he was certain that he should have been over his perpetual nervousness and self-depreciating stage (he didn't believe that he'd ever been close to that second point but Kirra insisted that, yes, he was) but apparently he wasn't because his mouth was dry and he wanted nothing more than to dip down into the cool, cool calmness of his mingled magical core and let the power sooth away all his troublesome emotions. He'd tried very hard to hide from Legacy - who was always very upset whenever he began to get nervous about returning to his own realm - and any Kindred who sympathized with her and would rat out his hiding places. Hedwig had helped by flying away from him like a ghost and making random appearances around the Hall or whichever part of the realm he was in at the time (it was a well-known fact that Hedwig didn't like to stray too far from her wayward human and she was absolutely awful when it came to payback and scoldings to whomever had the misfortune of upsetting Harry and, by association and adoration for said male, her).

Kirra was only coming because she was bringing several carefully constructed tangled webs that would keep Dumbledore (who he was annoyed with for ignoring him at his trial - among other things) away from Headquarters for the night while he visited his friends. Lucien was coming as well, the glint in his eyes slightly unnerving the younger male as it made him think that he was looking at a very hungry predator, and Kirra seemed triply amused at her brother. Harry decided it wasn't worth it for him to get involved and simply nudged Hedwig awake. She shuffled on his shoulder and made a soft annoyed sound he had dubbed The Grumble - with capital letters - as it was the same sort of sound most of the females in Kaeleer made when waking. Some (he refused to look at Kirra for fear he would

burst into laughter at the mere thought) snarled and threw things at him but they all ended up making The Grumble.

"You might want to wake up, Hedwig; we're almost there." The snowy owl glared at him and nipped him none to gently. He didn't flinch - she really didn't mean it and it wasn't nearly as bad as anything he'd been through before - but he did give her a mock-hurt look and faltered as though seriously injured. She clicked her beak but he could sense the amusement in her psychic scent. "Besides, if Dumbledore does manage to get around Kirra's webs we need to be ready to leave and I really don't want to leave you behind again."

"Like that old man could ever manage to best my sister," Lucien snorted.

"Sorry about that, by the way," Kirra piped up, looking up from where she was carefully activating each web and then vanishing it to its proper place around the property of Number 12 Grimmauld Place, ignoring her brother's comment. "I was in a hurry and I wasn't thinking quite clearly; it was rather early..." then in a murmur, "...unnaturally early..."

Harry coughed to cover his laugh and Hedwig clicked her beak quickly before looking away in an effort to hide her amusement. Lucien remained blank-faced and so would escape Kirra shooting them half-hearted glares. She finished with the last web quickly and banished it to its place. Once her task was complete, Harry looked across the street curiously. "Can we go in now?"

Kirra stood, dusted off her myrtle-coloured capris - things she absolutely adored since they covered her knees enough that she didn't scrape them so much but still allowed for her to keep cool during the summer - and straightened her slightly rumbled cerulean tunic. The lower edge was decorated with amber designs of twisting otter-like creatures. She offered him a grin to show she was ready and he waited for her to take the lead.

It didn't take long for the two houses on either side of Headquarters to shift over to allow room for Number 12 and once it had they quietly entered the front door. Nobody was expecting them and Kirra knew -

from well placed webs she had adapted for spying - that there were no meetings taking place. Lucien looked around the entry with interest and raised a brow as the two younger Blood shared a rapid whispered conversation. He cleared his throat softly and they shot him twin frowns. He paused at the looks he was receiving and shrugged, tilting his head to one side and making his way up the stairs without so much as a word. The two teens exchanged mischievous grins - free of their supposed 'restraining influence' - and crept quietly down into the basement kitchen. Hedwig shifted in excitement, never having been on any of Harry's adventures (minus the flying Ford Angelina). She was shushed ruthlessly when she made a soft hoot and Kirra gestured silently that she would go first.

She poked her head into the room and drew back quickly. / Remus is inside and so is Sirius and Molly/ she sent on a private psychic thread. He cocked his head and smirked playfully. She returned it and continued, / They all look tired so I'm guessing Dumbledore didn't follow my advice and take the chance to relax the whole 'searching for Harry' thing. /

/ Well we wouldn't want to keep them waiting/ Harry sent back. / Let's get in there. /

Kirra shook her head in mock-disappointment at the lack of creativity. / That's it? ./

/ The simplest things always seem to be the best, in my experience. /

She shrugged indifferently and then turned and marched right through the door as though she did it every day. "Hello, hello, hello!" She bowed and a Craft shield sprung up to absorb the three hexes that were sent her way. She looked back up at them and smirked as horrified comprehension dawned on their faces. "Fancy seeing you three up this late. Didn't think it would be needed now that Harry isn't in the realm." She raised a single eyebrow and tossed a glance beside her to the sight-shielded male. "What say you?"

"I say," he grinned as the three adults jumped in surprise at his sudden appearance. Hedwig hooted in delighted amusement and he gave her an affectionate look, "that I really do deserve more trust

than what Dumbledore has given me. It's not like I've gone and joined the Dark side...well I did." He frowned as though confused. "Kirra?"

"Well maybe Dumbledore was right not to trust you," she teased. "Everyone here has worried about you ever since we up and took all of your belongings and you've been in the Shadow Realm playing hide-and-seek with the wolves." His eyes widened. "Don't think I didn't notice. It was all Legacy has been talking about. She thinks that you are a marvellous hider since even her brothers can't find you."

"Well I had some help." He shrugged his shoulder and Hedwig ruffled her feathers haughtily. "Most of my hiding spots have been her idea."

"Well that explains it." Kirra grinned. "It was a female who was doing all the work."

Sirius was the first to react. A slow smirk turned into an impossibly wide grin before he glomped his godson, laughing heartily. "Harry!"

"Hey Siri," Harry wrapped his arms around the older man fondly, "long time no see."

Remus rolled his eyes but smiled all the same. "Certainly have had Albus running about looking for you. I take it that our darling Ms Kirra here has put up the appropriate measures to keep him that way." Kirra looked affronted.

"I did no such thing!" she denied. Then, with a wink, "My mother made the webs. I just put them to use."

Molly clucked her tongue impatiently and the moment Sirius had released Harry she began a thorough examination. Her gaze was piercing as she took in the actually-fitting clothing and the new glasses as opposed to his older (and considerably less attractive) broken ones. Harry stayed still for her whole inspection and smiled gently when she gave a small huff. "I suppose you're healthy enough." She grumped, looking thoroughly displeased that she wasn't able to fuss over him quite as much as she would like. "But I think you could go with some tea if you're planning on staying awake

all night." With that she promptly began to bustle about the kitchen to prepare said beverage.

She was right though, Harry did look healthy. He wasn't the same skinny, underfed boy who always came visiting during holidays. He was lean and had developed a fair amount of muscle from his daily weapons training. Mrs Beale, Marian, and Legacy made sure that he was present for every meal - including tea and snack times - and that he ate everything they piled onto his plate. Kirra and her mother ensured that he had plenty of clothing that fit (though Saetan had stubbornly denied them full rights to his wardrobe and had been sure that he had a fair amount of dress-wear as well) and Hedwig had made it a point to draw his attention to various accessories that she deemed shiny enough and good enough for her human. As a result of that particular venture he now had an attractive owl pin with glittering multi-faceted amber eyes.

"Harry!" For the second time in the night Harry was subjected to a literal attack of hugging from Hermione. He let out an 'oomph' at the impact and grinned around a mound of bushy hair at Ron. The red-head grinned back and smirked in amusement while nodding towards the frantic female portion of their trio. Harry rolled his eyes but smiled at the girl warmly when she pulled back. "Where have you been?" She demanded, prodding him firmly in the chest.

"In Kaeleer." He chuckled when she frowned sternly at him. "Don't worry, I've been under strict instruction to take care of myself from Legacy and Hedwig here." The owl hooted loudly from above them (she had taken flight when Hermione had lunged at her human) before she took her place on his shoulder once again. "But, between you and I, Daemonar is a slavedriver when he wants to be."

Lucien's rich laugh came from the kitchen door. Hermione whirled to face the source and her eyes narrowed in stubborn distaste. The elder male smirked and bowed with just a hint of mocking in it. "Pleasure to see you again Ms Granger," he intoned in amusement. "Though I must say, I certainly do feel a little putout that I did not receive such a warm greeting." Harry took a subtle step away from his female friend. Lucien had that strange look in his eyes that Daemon got sometimes during their Talk. He'd only ever seen Kirra

or Jaenelle put an end to that look and if Daemonar even left his younger cousin alone then... well, suffice to say he wasn't going to even try and deal with the other Warlord Prince.

"You'll receive such a welcome when you earn such a welcome," Hermione snapped back. "And since you haven't yet, you won't be getting one."

Lucien frowned softly but then it faded into a slow smirk. "Well I suppose I'll need to rectify that now won't I?" he murmured, but Hermione had already turned to Kirra and the two females were rapidly going over the types of things Harry was learning and how he was being treated. Harry turned to Ron and they shared identical shrugs of indifference before sitting down and greeting each other. Harry was then subjected to a long complaint about cleaning and such and listened to his friend with a patience he didn't actually feel while the kitchen was slowly filled with other Order members and more Weasleys' as they heard the commotion coming from the room. This second visit with the Order didn't last nearly as long as the first. Harry stayed until morning and slipped out with Hedwig, Kirra and Lucien while his friends were still deep in sleep after the unexpected visit late in the night. Harry found that the blind leap through the darkness was monumentally easier once Kirra managed to key his Sapphire jewel into the closest landing web as it provided a single spark of light in the darkness that allowed him to properly manage the leap even without Kirra. Lucien wasn't able to manage the same thing though, as he didn't have a dual magical core like the two teens did. Harry had both jewel magic and wizard magic, just like Kirra had both. Hedwig could manage the jump because Kirra had keyed in another of the Kindred (one she wasn't telling him about) that apparently had a similar dual core and had keyed Hedwig into this new Kindred's power for a similar effect.

"Have you finished packing yet?" Kirra asked curiously, poking her head around the wooden door and glancing down at his closed trunk. It was a new one she had gotten for free after helping the craftswizard to customize it for Harry's use. She had 'borrowed' a chip of his Sapphire Jewel and imbedded it into the silvery nameplate of the trunk. It was nestled between his first and last name and acted as a lock. He only needed to touch it for it to activate and unlock or

lock the trunk, depending on his preference at the time. It also activated a shrinking spell that both shrunk and changed the form of trunk. It changed into a ring with a sliver of sapphire on a silver band engraved with his name.

According to the wayward female, she had spent quite some time in France (where his trunk was made) at the Rue d'Etoiles, which was like the magical equivalent of Diagon Alley. She had made friends with the craftswizard at the trunk/furniture shop after the wizard had caught sight of some of her absent sketches that she made while lounging on a bench just across the street. The silver of the bolts and faceplate was complimented by the ebony of the wood and Harry adored the new trunk. He also liked the practicality of the thing.

As Kirra wasn't exactly an expert with charms and enchantments she had left that work to the craftswizard. She had wanted the trunk to have several compartments and had ended up deciding that Harry needed four compartments, three of which would be full-sized rooms. The first compartment looked like every other trunk, with the exception of a pad on the inside of the lid that would bring up the other compartments when pressed, and was where he stored his schoolbooks, quills, parchment, owl treats and other such things that he used everyday.

The second compartment was a library (though it was mostly empty at the moment) with a large leather-bound book that automatically recorded each book placed within the library and could summon the books if Harry asked it to. There was a small circle of chairs around a small fireplace in the corner, accompanied by a desk, that was wonderful for doing homework at or else reading around.

The third compartment was a combination personal potions lab and duelling chamber. Kirra had gone ahead and purchased a little of practically everything in the Apothecary to fill his ingredients cupboard and gave him a personalized set of potion-making tools. The duelling chamber was through a heavily warded door that would prevent any of his spells blasting through into the lab. The duelling chamber was pretty much empty with the minor exception of training dummies that could be animated and set to different levels for his training.

The fourth compartment was something like a miniature flat, though it only had two rooms. The first room in this compartment was a bathroom, complete with bathtub, shower, sink, toilette, and a laundry basket that automatically cleaned all his clothing before sending it back to his closet. The main room was half devoted to a small kitchenette and eating area and the other half devoted to a bedroom. His closet was really just an expanded wardrobe (with his now extensive collection of clothing - courtesy of various females - he definitely needed the space) but he called it a closet all the same. The two halves of the second room were divided only by a curtain that stretched across the middle of the room. The bedroom section was done in Gryffindor colours with rich chocolate-coloured woods for the furniture. His bathroom was connected to this section as it really didn't make sense for it to be near the kitchen.

All in all it was an impressive bit of work and had probably cost a fortune. Harry had been hesitant about accepting it but Kirra had gone off and returned with a letter from her father saying that it was a gift from the whole family and that Kirra just happened to play the biggest part in retrieving it. Privately he had said that Harry should just resign himself to gifts like that from the women since they all seemed to think he was too adorable for his own good. Besides, why was Harry complaining about attention? Harry agreed with this last (honestly, what Warlord Prince didn't like to be fussed over by the females?) and accepted the trunk without further complaint.

"Just finished." He tapped the jewel on the front and the trunk promptly turned into a ring which he slipped onto his finger easily. "Is there something you need?" They were leaving the next morning to spend the entire day at Headquarters and to join his friends for the trip to Hogwarts. Kirra was going to be sorted after the first years and she had stubbornly ignored any and all attempts at guessing which house she would be sorted into. It had gotten so bad with trying to talk to her about it (as her family was most curious as to which house she believed herself to be sorted into) that she had spun a web that rendered her - quite literally - deaf to anything related to her sorting.

She shrugged. "I don't but papa does. He says that he knows that your Talk is over but that he has one last lesson he thinks you need

to know, especially with this whole war of yours." Her eyes betrayed nothing and Harry stood, crossing the room warily to her side. "He says if you want to walk out of here tomorrow morning you'd best go and get it over with quickly."

"Do you know what this is about?" he asked before he fully exited the room. She shook her head.

"I don't and I don't quite think I want to," she murmured. "I wouldn't worry too much though. My papa doesn't do anything if it isn't necessary so it must be, necessary, I mean, for him to ask you to come. But still, be careful all the same."

Harry stared at her for a long moment before he dipped his head in acknowledgment. "I will. I'll see you in the morning then."

"Goodnight." She smiled at him before turning and walking down the hall towards her family's wing. Harry went the opposite way towards Daemon's office, nervous as to what the elder Warlord Prince could possibly want to teach him that he would keep it secret from his own daughter.

TBC...

Chapter#8

Ginny Weasley was used to being ignored. She had six older brothers and all of them came before her in everything. Most of her clothes were hand-me-downs from their younger years, aside from a few second-hand blouses that she had acquired from her friends. If she ever tried something (Quidditch was probably the first thing that came to mind - though no one in her family knew of that particular hobby) it had already been done. In the twin's case, they had even gone so far as to invent things she hadn't done yet and to go off and do them before she even got the idea. Although that was pushing the jealousy a little too far, so she didn't tend to dwell on it.

She could vividly remember her first year at Hogwarts as being rather lonely (Tom Riddle's diary aside). The girls in her year were snobby and ignored her - writing her off as 'just another Gryffindor Weasley'. Now this was true of course, but she wasn't just another Weasley. She was the first female born into the family in seven generations and she was the seventh child. She had always read (in various textbooks belonging to her elder brothers) that seven was an extraordinarily magical number and so she figured that her particular combination of sevens should have made her particularly special; at least, that was what she liked to entertain when she was younger (anything that separated her from her overbearing brothers was welcomed with open arms and free drinks all around).

But of course that 'specialness' had to go and manifest itself in the form of receiving a certain diary and of being possessed by a certain memory of a Dark Lord. And naturally - as if her life couldn't get better than that - when said memory/spirit was expelled from her body he just had to leave an imprint behind in the back of her mind. Naturally said imprint had to include the particularly well-used gift of Parseltongue and of a deja vu sort of feeling with most of her homework.

Ginny sighed and glowered down at her fourth year potions book. It was really rather annoying, she decided, to be able to go through the book and vaguely recognize most of the potions. She had even begun a sort of game: hide the last few ingredients and try and guess what they were. She was at two for one odds right now.

"Ginny dear, are you all packed?" Her mother bustled into the room and eyed the scattered textbooks in distaste. "You really should take better care of your things." She waved her wand absently and the books all stacked themselves neatly into her trunk. Ginny wasn't precisely sure why her mother bothered - they still had all of the next day to pack - unless...

"Mum, are we cleaning again tomorrow?" she ventured warily. Her mother looked up, startled at the rather too adult tone her youngest child had taken. Ginny hastily rearranged her expression into a childish sort of sulk and was relieved when her mother waved off the tone.

"Goodness me, no. Really no use for it, now is there? No, tomorrow is for you to double check your homework and to pack. Kirra also mention that she and Harry will be returning tomorrow so that we can all travel to King's Cross together." Ginny looked up curiously at the mention of the other girl.

Unlike Hermione, who was often condescending without meaning to be, Kirra was perfectly aware of everyone around her at all times. Within minutes of their first meeting Kirra had given a wry sort of smirk and made an offhand comment about it sucking to be the youngest - especially when being youngest didn't necessarily mean being unintelligent as elders assumed. Ginny had been surprised at the comment hitting quite so close to home and had been delighted when Kirra had returned the next day with what she called a top-secret early birthday present. The present entailed a trunk with two compartments. The first was the usual trunk space and the second was split between a small bed- and bathroom while the other half of the compartment was a simple desk, fireplace and three sets of shelves arranged in U-pattern. The ornate stand that stood in the open head of the shelves held a book that recorded everything the shelves held and gave a brief description of each. As a second surprise Ginny also discovered a neat little table and a small ingredients cabinet for potion making (filled with the standard school ingredients as well as a few not-so-standard). The wardrobe in her bedroom contained two new robes as well as two plain white blouses and one white shirt (these last two items weren't fancy they were

simply new). A new set of black school robes and a beautiful pair of sea-green dress robes that shimmered just the right amount between shades when she shifted in them.

She had tried to protest spending so much on a gift for someone Kirra hardly knew but the other girl had just shrugged. 'I have it, why shouldn't I use it to help a fellow youngest-daughter' had been her excuse. Ginny had relented and accepted the gift (really, she wasn't as silly as her brother about accepting expensive gifts, but the trunk had to have cost several hundred galleons so she had needed to protest) but only after making Kirra swear that it wasn't too much trouble and that she would be giving more trunks of similar make to other people - people Ginny had to know as well - so that the youngest Weasley wasn't being singled out in the giving of expensive gifts.

After a week or so of living in Headquarters, Ginny was certainly glad she had accepted the trunk. Without the - blissfully clean - bedroom and bathroom, Ginny would have nearly suffocated on dust and constantly having her brothers breathing down her neck. They hadn't discovered her secret trunk as one of the features was that it turned into a simple charm gold bracelet with a little lioness (really, Kirra was thoughtful enough to do away with the Gryffindor thing without quite giving up on it) charm. She simply needed to touch it and say 'activate' for the trunk to unshrink. After giving the password ('escape', since that's what it allowed her to do) to the lioness that decorated the faceplate - it moved, mind you, not unlike wizarding paintings - the creature would flick it's tail and the trunk would unlock. Even if Ginny maintained it was an unnecessarily expensive gift there was nothing anyone could say to make her give it up... not to mention she was sure -as in 100 percent positive - Kirra had spelled it to return to her as it always seemed to find its way into her pockets if she ever set its 'hidden' form down somewhere - lacking pockets, it showed up lying on a table nearby or else simply latched around her wrist on its own.

So, as it was, she and Kirra got along famously and she was pleased to hear about the other girl's acceptance into Hogwarts. She resolved to be certain that she remained friends with the other even if she was sorted into a different house. It was the least she could do since

Harry - while fair enough company on his own - simply wasn't female and couldn't possibly be the best company for long periods of time.

"That's great mum," she replied cheerfully. While her mother fussed over packing some fresh laundry she had brought with her, Ginny mentally made a note to transfer the contents of her public trunk - the one that she had used up until Kirra had bought her the new one - into the one around her wrist while on the train. "Do you need any help?" she added for good measure.

"Oh no, I'm done here. I'll just go check up on your brothers now..." Her mother continued to mutter absently and eventually left the room she shared with Hermione. She waited until she was sure that the only other Weasley woman was gone before she retrieved the hidden letter that she had tucked away in her potions book. She opened it and began to read where she had left off before her mother had interrupted.

Dear Ginny, (she actually hadn't gotten past the opening of said letter)

I'm sorry I kidnapped your Boy-Who-Lived but really, he's a Warlord Prince and he needed training. It's not like it's my fault a certain headmaster of a certain school named after a certain breed of pig's disfiguration wouldn't give me a straight answer about training him properly or not. (Ginny snickered at this, quite loudly too) Continuing on...

How's your summer been? I hope you've put that gift to good use. Honestly...how your mother expects a female to share space and clothing with mostly males is beyond me... I've been fine over here (though Shadow's been sulking ever since I brought Harry over) and me and my mother finally adapted that hangover potion (for which papa and Uncle Lucivar are eternally grateful...though whatever gave them the idea they were getting any is beyond me...). (Ginny outright laughed at that, having heard many a story about the aforementioned males)

Thanks for your help with that whole pet thing though. I would have died several times over if I'd have not found a reason at denying the

Kindred's claim to that particular position at Hogwarts. We're waiting for the train ride before we decide on a new name - thought we'd give you the honour since you 'introduced' us. Speaking of pets, I had the best idea for a Winsol gift...er, Christmas or Midwinter or whichever one you'll celebrate with me... but I can't say anything more because it will ruin the surprise.

We'll be coming back tomorrow, as I'm sure has been announced several times over, so you have time to scheme on the best way to draw attention away from Harry's current state (I wouldn't ask him about how he managed such a state as I know and it isn't exactly the best bedtime story). I've prepared a list of glamour charms that I'm fairly certain can hide the worst of it but that is still subject to meddling and such. Harry was awake long enough to tell me that I should warn you about Moody... hang on... (Ginny could tell she was using a Dictation Quill, as she could clearly see Kirra pausing as comprehension dawned on her pale features) Alastor Moody as in Mad-Eye Moody! Well, bloody hell, I can see why you warned me you bloody...stupid...stubborn...argh! (A single brow was raised at the outburst) Anyways, just talk to the man and tell him Kirra says he'll keep his mouth shut until I say so if he knows what's good for him. Also, tell him, yes, that is a threat.

Well that's all I suppose. I'll see you tomorrow and I can't wait to help you transfer all your public-trunk stuff to your proper trunk (don't think I don't know what you've been up to! - I've got a sixth sense about these things, you know) on the train. I've managed a wonderful secrecy spell that should keep everyone out of our compartment until we're done. I'll show it to you and you can try it out - it really is wonderful for use on beds; Shadow hasn't been able to sneak in and shed all over me for weeks!

Missing female contact and suffering from stubborn males,

Kirra

Ginny smirked and allowed herself the freedom to laugh out loud at the closing. Kirra was a lot like the sister she never had and treated Ginny as though they were actually related. She didn't push that role though, she also acted as simply a good friend. She wrote letters,

and often 'kidnapped' Ginny for female outings - comfort food, muggle chick-flicks at the cinema, spas, and sleepovers. She never treated Ginny as though she was special but she did treat her as though she was her own person even when she was amongst the entire Weasley family.

"Ginny? Where did you get that letter?" Ginny snapped her attention to Hermione, who stood in the doorway. She was glaring sternly at the parchment clasped in Ginny's hand. Technically they weren't supposed to send letters to anyone and they only wrote to Harry because, well, he was Harry. Hermione had been an absolute stickler for rules for as long as Ginny had known her and this deal with their letters was no exception. Ginny had managed to get a few letters to some of her friends (more like good acquaintances really) and received some replies in return but Hermione had managed to find out about each and had demanded that she turn them in. Thus far, Hermione had not caught Ginny with letters from Kirra (Hermione may like the other female for her help but that didn't mean she trusted her or liked her on a personal level) and Ginny wasn't about to let her get this one.

"From a friend," she replied vaguely.

"Which friend?" The older girl eyed her suspiciously.

"My friend." Hermione looked annoyed and impatient and Ginny resisted the urge to smirk.

"Which one of your friends?"

Ginny considered telling the truth and discretely slipped the letter behind her back. She slipped her wand from her robes while she answered the bushy-haired Gryffindor. "You know her."

"Who?" Hermione grit out, tapping her foot impatiently.

Ginny muttered a quick *Incendio* as Hermione spoke her one-word question. With all the wards and secrecy spells around Grimmauld Place, it was possible to get away with small and simple spells. The letter went up in flames and Ginny promptly smothered it beneath the

quilt on her bed. It went out without problem and Ginny quickly pulled her hands out and showed them to Hermione. "What letter?"

Ron watched the strange female, Kirra, greet his mother the next morning. Just off to her side stood Harry and Ron had known his friend long enough to know that something about him was off. Physically, he looked fine. Almost too normal if you really wanted to get into it. Ron trailed his eyes over the slight curl of a slouch in Harry's shoulders and at the stiff way he was walking. He had hidden it well, to be sure, but Ron could still tell that something was paining his friend. Jade eyes looked dull and there was concealed pain - emotional and physical - glinting behind a mask of contentment at seeing his friends again.

"Hey mate, took you long enough to get back!" Ron greeted cheerfully, deciding not to make a comment on his best friend's world-weary look. "Hermione's been driving me absolutely batty about doing the homework. Hasn't even got our letters and already she's studying for OWL's."

Harry gave a tired sort of smile. "Well if you had of done it before she got here..." Ron scowled at the suggestion and Harry smiled vaguely. "Ya, I guess not."

"So..." Ron trailed off and, with a furtive glance at his mother, gave Harry a pointed look. "What's with you?"

"What do you mean, 'what's with me'?" The complete lack of trust in his eyes made Ron's heart clench. He had guessed something was wrong but he hadn't realized it went so deep.

He hurried to reassure his friend, deeply troubled that the other male looked ready to bolt. "You don't have to say. Just thought I should ask." Harry relaxed a fraction and gave the red-head a grateful look.

"Harry." Kirra's voice floated over and the green-eyed male turned to face the blonde. She was staring at him worriedly even if she was smiling happily. "Do you know where he is?"

Harry cocked his head to one side as though listening for something. Ron watched his friend return to the young teen he had been during

his last visit as he grinned absently. Emerald eyes glimmered in amusement for a moment before they dulled again even as he offered a soft smile to the female. "He's waiting upstairs with Hedwig."

"Thanks!" She grinned and turned to Ginny. The red-haired female was watching the exchange with a soft frown but she smiled and waved a little before the two of them darted up the stairs, chatting away eagerly.

"What was that about?" Ron asked, raising an eyebrow as he fell into step alongside Harry as they made their way slowly up to their shared room.

"Hm?" Harry blinked. "Oh, Kirra found an appropriate pet to bring with her to Hogwarts - since Ginny helped her find him she's waited until now so that Ginny can have the honour of naming him. Unfortunately Kaelas got to him so now he can efficiently hide even from the darker jeweled Blood." Ron had no idea what he was talking about, of course, but he nodded all the same. Harry didn't wince or even remove his features from their calm expression but Ron knew that he was hurting. He spared a sideways look at the dark-haired male and frowned.

Harry looked over and raised a single brow. "What?"

Ron looked away, a strange awkward feeling stirring in his chest. "Nothing."

"He's beautiful..." Ginny breathed, staring at the elegant bird in awe. "I get to name him?"

"Yup," Kirra chirped happily. "Bet you can't believe that scrawny sac of feathers turned into this pretty boy eh?"

"You're telling me." The red-head beamed in utter delight. "He doesn't look a thing like he used to!"

"And that's why we've decided you should do the honour of giving him a new name, since he wouldn't have made this transition if you hadn't have pushed me into purchasing him."

The eagle that stood on the desk surveyed them proudly. His gleaming feathers ranged in colour from snowy white interspersed all across his underside, to soft brown, to shiny auburn, to vibrant red, to black and a soft golden-brown colour. His eyes were a deep blood-red with amber undertones in sunlight. Deadly talons gleamed faintly in the dull light from the grimy windows and Ginny continued to admire the beautiful bird.

When Kirra had come by Headquarters during Harry's absence, Ginny had been tugged along on a trip to find the pet that the elder witch would be bringing with her. They had spent a good deal of time in the Magical Menagerie as Kirra methodically examined every animal and asked every possible question about each on care, likes and dislikes, habits, instincts... everything. Ginny, in an effort to leave the rather boring discussion on Flobberworms, had wandered into the back of the store where the unsavoury or else unwanted pets animals were kept. She had spotted the cramped cage in the corner and had, at first, written it off as unimportant until she had heard the soft, dying sound coming from it.

The cage contained the very eagle she was now admiring, though at the time he had barely resembled a bird. The bottom of his cage was filthy with diarrhea and molted feathers. The eagle had looked more like a skeleton with skin and patches of feathers than the majestic thing it should have been. There was no gossamer sheen to the feathers and the few that stuck to his skin in clumps were missing portions of the barbs. The only thing that made the Weasley female stay were his eyes. His beautiful shining eyes begged with her to please, please, help him. She had been filled with rage at the state he was in and had stormed over to Kirra, grabbed her arm, and dragged her over. With fury still coursing through her veins she had pointed to the cage and said in a flat, no-nonsense, do-it-or-you'll-die, voice "That one. Now."

Ginny was thrilled to see the eagle looking like he should. Although he was a little thin for her liking. But that could be remedied with a few weeks of free-range hunting at Hogwarts.

"So do you have a good name for him? The Kindred back at my home don't exactly have very creative names." Kirra's eyes glimmered in mischievous happiness.

Ginny considered the eagle for some time. "I think," she replied at length, "that Rex is a good name." She nodded after she said it, pleased with her decision. "It means 'King', you know."

Kirra's eyes widened. "Really?" She looked impressed. "I like it. What do you think boy: is Rex good?" The eagle bobbed its head and Kirra's lips curled into a wide grin. "Then Rex it is."

Ginny beamed as her friend praised and fussed over the newly named Rex. Once the blonde had settled down Ginny started up again with the conversation. "So, are you going to tell me what's wrong with Harry?"

"Oh Gin..." Kirra's face fell. "I don't know what to do!" she wailed finally. "I know what my papa did was necessary to prepare him for the war that's stirring here but I just can't help him. I'm a Queen; I'm supposed to be able to take care of him but I just..." Ginny hated the defeated look her friend wore. "I just can't help him."

"Hey, come on," Ginny coaxed softly. "Don't worry so much. I know you want to help him and I know he trusts you but really...you haven't known him for very long. Harry shuts himself off from everyone when he's in a bad state - that's just what he does - so its understandable that he won't let your help affect him."

"Could you help him for me?" Kirra asked hopefully. "I know you two aren't the closest of friends but you are closer than he and I. You've said he shuts himself off from his close friends and from strangers but maybe...maybe because you're neither a close friend nor a stranger...maybe he'll let you help him."

"I don't know Kirra..." Ginny shifted uncomfortably. She had gotten over her childhood crush on the Boy-Who-Lived but she wasn't sure she wanted to push her luck at normalcy by spending any long length of time with the boy.

"Please Gin," Kirra asked imploringly, "he's in a worse state than what you can see. The glamour charms will hold but they're linked to his power and if he doesn't heal his physical body quick then he'll be running almost exclusively on his magical core and if it's already got a constant stream running to keep the glamours up..." Ginny didn't need to hear the end of the explanation.

Witches and wizards were different from muggles because their well being was connected not just to their physical body but to their magical core as well. It had been theorized that a witch or wizard could survive solely off their magic - it would destroy their bodies but they would still be alive enough to regain that strength. Unfortunately, you couldn't go that far down the road without dying because the magical core was also linked to the physical body. The healthier the person the healthier their magic. The whole point of the theory had originally been to work only on keeping their magical core strong and ignoring the body. It worked but the wizard who had theorized it had become a Squib after nursing his body back to health. Ginny didn't think it would get that far with Harry but she most certainly wasn't going to sit back and with just that assumption.

"I'll do what I can."

Harry looked up, startled and visibly upset at the intrusion, when Ron came into the room unannounced and began to speak in his usual loud and blunt manner. "Booklists have arrived." He tossed Harry's letter to him on the bed and Harry took the time to take a deep breath and school his expression into one of mild interest. He looked down at his letter and began to open it, oblivious to the strange look Ron was giving him after witnessing the transition from shock to false-calm.

"Later than usual, aren't they?" Harry commented, scanning the usual letter briefly and moving onto the list of books required. "Only two new ones, The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 5, by Miranda Goshawk, and Defensive Magical Theory, by Wilbert Slinkhard. The defence book isn't very good." He added, forgetting for a moment that he wasn't supposed to have already known which books they were using. Kirra had found out because she had received her letter earlier. Harry suspected that the lateness was one of Dumbledore's plans to keep him at Headquarters while he waited. Unluckily for Dumbledore,

Hedwig was perfectly capable of delivering her letters even when he was in another Realm.

"Oh?" Ron asked curiously. "How would you know that?"

Harry never got the chance to answer for the twins chose that moment to apparate into the room with a crack! Harry tensed but didn't otherwise react to the sudden sound and appearance. Ron, on the other hand, started and fell off his bed. George laughed while his twin just grinned.

"We were just wondering who set the Slinkhard book," said Fred conversationally.

"Because it means that Dumbledore's found a new DADA teacher," George continued.

"And about time too," Fred interjected. George nodded sagely.

"We heard mum talking about it a few weeks back on the Extendable Ears. It seems Dumbledore's had a right time trying to find a new teacher this year."

Hedwig made a short noise from her perch on the footboard of Harry's bed. He shot her a half-amused, half-exasperated look. That was her smugly amused sound. He knew it was being made in regards to the headmaster because it was flavoured with contempt.

"One dead, one's memory has been removed, one sacked and one locked in a trunk for nine months," Harry recited, continuing to lock eyes with Hedwig. Her expression said 'See? I've always said that he wasn't a very smart human'. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

Hedwig hooted in agreement. Fred and George turned to look at her with raised brows as she shifted smugly. Harry rolled his eyes. "So anyways...Ron?" Harry looked at his gobsmacked friend with a faint frown.

When he received nothing in response Fred rolled his eyes. "What is it Ron?" he asked impatiently. When he still didn't get an answer the

twin walked over to read over his little brother's shoulder. His jaw dropped in disbelief.

"Prefect?" George leapt forward and snatched the forgotten envelope, upending it and catching the red and gold badge that fell out.

"No way," George muttered in absolute incredulity.

"There must have been a mistake," Fred declared, peering up at the letter through the light as though it might provide some clues about the mystery that was Ron being prefect. "No one in their right mind would make Ron a prefect."

"Well Dumbledore isn't exactly in his right mind now is he?" Harry murmured. The twins grinned at the comment.

"Well at least one of you has their priorities straight," Fred declared, clapping Harry on the back (he tensed beneath the hand but didn't move) and shooting Ron a scathing look.

George made a face and thrust the badge into Ron's hands. "Oh, mum's going to be revolting."

"Prefect...ickle Ronnie the prefect." Fred made a similarly disgusted look. Harry just rolled his eyes and smirked in amusement at his best friend's still shocked expression.

Hermione burst into the room, a letter and identical badge clasped tightly in her hand. Harry jumped this time and shot her dark look. He didn't appreciate the sudden entrance. She beamed and her eyes widened when they fell on the badge in Ron's hand. "Oh Ron! Congratulations!" She lunged forwards and caught the boy in a tight hug before she gave one to Harry as well. The young Warlord Prince relaxed when he caught the psychic scent filled with happiness and affection and smiled down at his bushy-haired best friend. Ron woke from his shock and gave her a look that was as close to being a pout as the red-haired male ever got.

"Hey! I'm the one who made prefect here, why does he get all the attention?" Harry laughed at the scathing look Hermione sent him. She jumped, startled at the sound of Harry laughing.

"Oh Ron." She rolled her eyes and propped her hands on her hips while she regarded him sternly. She never got the chance to launch into a lecture about childish jealousy for Mrs Weasley came bustling in with a pile of freshly laundered clothes.

"Ginny said the booklists had come at last." She glanced at the scattered envelopes and parchment. "If you'll just give them to me, I'll get your books and things at Diagon Alley this afternoon while you're packing."

Harry shook his head. "No need for me Mrs Weasley." He said in a deceptively smooth voice. Inwardly he was still trembling at the effort it took to reign in his volatile dual-magic but it did not show. "Kirra and I have already gotten out school things. I believe she recruited the help of your daughter in the naming of her animal - a golden eagle." Mrs Weasley wore an expression of mingled surprise and disapproval. "Her grandfather went with her and I remained at the Hall in Kaeleer for my training with Daemonar." He reassured her.

She frowned but accepted this. Turning to her youngest son she continued with where she had left off, "Ron, I'll need to get you some new pajamas, is there any particular colour you wanted?"

"Get him red and gold," George piped up. "To match his badge." He wore an absolutely wicked smirk.

"His badge?" Mrs Weasley was still frowning absently, obviously still not pleased that Harry had been out of her care for quite so long.

"His lovely shiny new prefect's badge," Fred continued with the air of one wishing to get the worst over with quickly.

"His...but...Ron's not..." Mrs Weasley stammered, staring in disbelief. "Ron?"

He held up his badge and winced when his mother shrieked. "I don't believe it!" she exclaimed, "I don't believe it! Oh Ron, that's wonderful! A prefect! That's everyone in the family!" She hugged him tightly.

Fred and George looked scandalized. "What are Fred and I, next door neighbours?" George demanded as his mother continued to praise and croon over their younger brother.

Harry chuckled faintly. "I just notice how she seems to have left Ginny out of her calculations," he murmured to them mischievously. "It seems you might have at least one other sibling waiting for you to properly corrupt her."

The twins smirked. "Right you are, Harry -"

"- right you are." They continued to grin even as Ron and his mother made arrangements for him to receive a new broom as his reward.

Harry pitied anyone who pissed off Ginny once the twins were done with her.

TBC...

Chapter#9

"Oh Moody!" Kirra sang happily, draping herself over his shoulder despite his efforts to throw her off. "How come you haven't said hello to me yet?" The ex-Auror glowered at the female and at the eagle that clung to her shoulder stubbornly despite the noise and the movement.

"Hello. Now get off," he deadpanned. The magical eye spun in its socket to watch the rest of the room but his normal eye continued to glare at the blonde. The girl had followed him around as often as she was able, when she had first arrived. Her excuse had been that he was too jumpy and needed to get used to being around people who weren't going to attack him even if they were following him. He had tried everything to get her to leave him alone but in the end he had just accepted that she wasn't going anywhere and eventually even taught her a few things so that she could defend herself both with her type of magic and with his type of magic. She continued to beam at him and he narrowed his eye dangerously, having known what tricks she pulled whenever she wore that sort of smile. "What do you want from me woman?"

She raised a single eyebrow. "Am I not allowed to like spending time with you? Or does that go against the immortal law of 'constant vigilance'...?"

"Can never be too careful," he grumped, prodding her with his wand. "Now away with yeh!"

"Not until you admit you like me, however deep down that affection may be buried beneath paranoia and constant vigilance." He growled fiercely at her in hopes that he could scare her off. He knew it wouldn't work but he did it anyway - blame it on habit. She grinned at him. "This is why Kaelas wanted to give you lessons on growling."

"If I admit it will you leave me alone?" he demanded. She smiled happily and nodded. "Fine. I like you."

"Yay!" she cheered and kissed his cheek, laughing at his spluttering before she darted off, with a wicked smirk and a cheeky wink, towards the rest of the children.

"I like ya when you're not near me!" he shouted after her. She shook her head and smirked.

"It's too late for that Moody! You've already admitted it! I know you like me now!" He scowled and sent a minor stinging hex at her, knowing that her automatic shield would absorb the magic. Despite the fact that he often tossed the hex at the young Queen, Molly still rounded on him with a disapproving frown fixed on her face.

"You shouldn't go throwing hexes at the girl Alastor!" she scolded. "Especially not when her back is turned. How is she supposed to trust the Order if its members continuously attack her?"

"She's never trusted the Order," Moody growled in reply. Part of him was proud that she didn't trust the Order but still trusted him. The other part of him was annoyed that she trusted him even when he attacked her when her back was turned. "And her shields can stand far more than just a stinging hex - even when she's asleep." I should know, I've tried. He thought with just a hint of amusement. That one had gotten him chunked forcibly out of the room and an angry wrestling match with the irate female (he had made her miss out on her morning coffee so he felt he'd gotten enough revenge for it). "Besides: constant vigilance." He felt that explained everything, Kirra did too for that manner (she pulled out that saying - affectionately deemed the 'Moody card' - often).

Molly was still frowning. "Well I still don't think its appropriate for you to treat her like that." She knew that the girl was a Queen and her instincts wouldn't allow for an attack on the girl, especially from a male. In the end she just scowled at him once more before returning to her table of food and making sure that everyone had enough.

"Mad-Eye!" Kirra came back over with a metal flask and held it out triumphantly. "Try this. I made it myself." His electric blue eye swivelled and fixed on the flask. She'd pulled far too many tricks with his drinks for him to drink it just on her word. Her eyes rolled in

exasperation. "It's a modified version of the Gravediggers. All the taste but without the debilitating effects." Her smile was encouraging and eager. "C'mon you can test it for poisons if you want."

"You mum didn't help ya?" He took the flask and sniffed it warily, magical eye still examining it while his normal one peered at her with a dangerous sort of intensity.

"No, mama was too busy getting plastered with papa and Uncle Lucivar since she figured out how to adapt the hangover potion to her own needs." The girl was smiling mischievously. "So I stole her notes and managed to fuse the Gravediggers with the potion to create that." She pointed to the flask. "I want you to do the honours of naming the stuff since 'Gravedigger' doesn't exactly suit it anymore."

"Hn," Moody grunted, tasting the contents once he had thoroughly satisfied himself that it wasn't poisoned. "You'd make a pretty galleon if you sold this stuff. Liquid gold, it is."

Her features twisted into a smug look with a hint of wickedness. "Liquid Gold... I like it." She smirked. "Good naming. I might just take you up on that idea though." Moody froze.

"You're not serious."

"No, that's Sirius." With a perfectly straight face, she pointed at the laughing man. "See you later Mad-Eye!"

"I've created a monster in that one..." he grumbled once she was gone for good to the other teens.

She rolled her eyes and shared a grin with Kirra as they prodded both Harry and Neville into the compartment where Luna Lovegood sat reading an upside down copy of The Quibbler. "Morning Luna," Kirra chirped. Rex the eagle made a soft noise in greeting from his perch on the short-haired blonde's shoulder.

"Good morning," Luna said. Her eyes came into focus for a moment as she smiled at the older girl. "You're the second one there but the first one here," she continued on in a dreamy voice.

Kirra beamed. "First but not last!" she agreed. Harry looked between the two as though they were insane. Ginny thought they probably were but didn't comment. Luna was always a little strange and Kirra was entitled to her own strangeness if she so chose.

"Are you going to help me with this or not?" she demanded playfully. Kirra smirked.

"I'm going, I'm going." She pointed at the trunk and made a swishing motion with her hand before she pointed at Ginny's bracelet. The beat-up trunk before the girls blurred for a moment before it vanished and the bracelet glowed gold. It faded once Ginny touched the lion charm. "See? I made good on my word."

"I never doubted it." Ginny grinned back. Harry raised a brow.

"So she's the one that got the first one?" Ginny looked over sharply at the green-eyed male. That had probably been the most that Harry had said all morning. His answers were either short or non-existent and he took everything that came at him with a straight face and no comments. Kirra, true to her word, did not press him and did not try to help him beyond what she offered to everyone else. Ginny, true to her own word, had talked a little with the teen - though it hadn't gone beyond a few offhand statements and snide comments about her siblings and about the goings-on of the morning.

"Yes." Kirra nodded. "I wasn't very well going to give the first one to a male," said the girl haughtily. Ginny laughed and sat down on the compartment bench between Luna and Kirra. Neville and Harry sat opposite the girls.

"Had a good summer Luna?" Ginny asked curiously. Kirra mentioned that she was corresponding with the dreamy-eyed girl in a few of her letters to Ginny and so Ginny was curious about what it was about the Ravenclaw that had caught Kirra's attention. It helped that Ginny had liked Luna when they had first met - even if they hadn't hung out very often.

"Yes. It was quite enjoyable, you know." She nodded pleasantly to the red-head and smiled a little at Kirra. The elder raised an eyebrow

playfully and smirked when Luna gave a little smile and nod of greeting to the eagle on her shoulder. "Hello King," she added before she turned back to the compartment in general. "You're Harry Potter," she said bluntly, staring at Harry.

"Yes, I know." Harry smiled faintly, eyes dancing in amusement.

"You're a Warlord Prince," she continued absently. Her eyes sharpened when she next spoke. "You follow an ancient legacy that few know of and fewer still should ever learn." The sharpness dulled and she smiled dreamily as she returned to her magazine.

Ginny looked in confusion at Kirra. She smiled grimly and shook her head. Harry didn't react or respond to Luna. He stared at her for some time before simply nodding and turning to stare out the window.

They sat quietly until Neville began to talk about the present he had received. A *Mimulus mimbletonia* - a strange grey, cactus-like plant in a pot that was covered in boils instead of spines. He seemed really excited and Ginny was happy that he had actually received something that he liked. Not many people knew it, but Ginny and Neville were actually rather good friends. She sat closer to the older Gryffindors instead of the ones her age because she felt rather detached from the rest of them - having grown up around older people for most of her life. Neville sat closer the younger children because the elder ones often ignored him or avoided him because of his clumsiness. The two of them talked during breakfast and Neville was always happy to help Ginny with her homework, even if she didn't really need it. It suited them both just fine since Neville needed someone who treated him as though he wasn't clumsy and Ginny needed someone who wouldn't treat her as though she were a silly little child. Despite Neville taking Ginny to the Yule ball in her third year, the two were nothing more than good friends.

He was talking about a defence mechanism that the plant possessed when Kirra's eyes widened and she waved her hands quickly. "No, no, I've seen one of these before," she said to him quickly. "It'll make a right smelly mess if you poke it while we're cramped in here." The boy grinned sheepishly but his eyes glimmered mischievously. Ginny resisted the urge to laugh. Neville knew exactly what the plant did

and he knew precisely what would happen if he were to do anything of the like while inside the closed compartment. That was probably why he had brought it out. He caught her eye and smiled at her, winking so that only she could see. The male was smarter than people gave him credit for.

The door slid open and all of them - Luna excepted - turned to look. Cho Chang stood in the door, staring into the compartment with a smile. Ginny noticed Kirra stiffen and her eyes harden. Harry looked up in mild interest even if his back was stiff with tension.

"Hello Harry," the Ravenclaw Seeker greeted.

"Hello Cho," he returned in a low voice.

She blushed at the sound. Ginny rolled her eyes at the silliness of it all. Harry looked like he wanted nothing more than for her to leave and there she was - standing and blushing for no apparent reason other than that the bespectacled male had said hello to her. (Ginny chose to forget that she had done the same thing when she had first met; though, in her own defence, Ginny hadn't met Harry before then at the time while Cho had met him the year before.)

"Um...well, I just thought I'd say hello." She smiled once more and closed the compartment door. Harry raised a single eyebrow in disbelief and glanced across the way at Ginny who was snickering at the absurdity.

"I don't suppose you'll elaborate about what is so funny then," he murmured. Ginny snickered at the seductive hum in his voice that he probably wasn't even aware of. It started Kirra up snickering as well which led Ginny to believe that she knew exactly where he had learned to use such a tone without actually registering what he was being taught.

"Cho..." her snickers renewed themselves and she forced her voice to calm enough for speech, "she seemed rather flustered, is all."

Harry raised a single eyebrow. "Oh? I hadn't noticed." Ginny gave him a sharp second-glance. There was a fey sort of intelligence in his

emerald eyes and she was startled to realize that he had known exactly what his voice sounded like and exactly what it did to those who heard it. A lazy smirk curled his lips and he returned to staring out the window only now his posture was a smug sort of recline as opposed to the tense position he had been in before.

Ginny continued to shoot glances at him out of the corner of her eye. This fey, green-eyed, male was completely different from the male she had heard second-hand stories about ever since Ron had become his friend. This male did not bear any resemblance to the young boy who had saved her in the Chamber of Secrets nor to the male she had seen living in the Gryffindor tower. This male was confident and seductive beneath his tense exterior. Ginny knew that the mask of tenseness would be dropped as soon as he had recovered from whatever it was that had made the mask in the first place and when that did... Ginny frowned internally. She had seen her brother's reaction to Harry's shouting when Harry hadn't been in the room or aware of what was happening and it hadn't been the best. It had taken Hermione a fair amount of time to convince him that it was still the same Harry they had known and that he didn't mean to yell at them or speak so callously. She worried that when the true Harry - the one beneath the mask - emerged that people might not like what they saw.

She spared Kirra a glance. The girl had borrowed a copy of The Quibbler from Luna and was scratching away happily at a crossword, converging with Luna for the answers when it failed to come to her mind, and paying very little attention to Ginny's absent musings. She supposed that if Kirra approved of the new Harry that it couldn't be that bad. Well, maybe not for someone who conversed with Kirra as regularly as she did but if everyone who believed Harry liked him as much as they said then they shouldn't have a problem accepting him when the time came.

Harry stared at the compartment door as it opened. He was already keeping a stranglehold on seduction tendrils and, as he reached for his power instinctively, his eye twitched faintly at the sudden spike of power as it trembled in the too-small confines of his physical body. When he took notice that the intruders were only Ron and Hermione with their respective, noisy, pets he was forced to quickly siphon the accumulated energy off in the only way he knew how. With a sharp

motion that no one noticed as the two new prefects settled in and complained a bit, Harry cut his hand on his hidden stiletto (cleverly tucked into a wrist holster on his left arm - he had his wand secured in a wand holster on his right) and sighed as the release of blood allowed the built up power to escape with it. Once the majority of the magic had escaped he used the remainder to seal the slice and clean up the blood. There was still an bright red line of new and injured flesh where the blade had cut but He could hide that easily enough.

"Well there are two fifth-year prefects from each house," Hermione informed them as a group, a disgusted look on her face. "Boy and girl each."

"Yes, well, we knew that already didn't we? It's in Hogwarts: A History, after all," Harry murmured. Only Ginny, he thought, heard him, since she was the only one smirking. He quirked an eyebrow at her and she snickered but cleverly disguised it as she let her hair fall forward in her face before she tucked it behind her ear. That brief moment allowed her to compose herself enough to listen as Hermione went on to tell them that Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were the Slytherin prefects.

Hermione was beginning to report the other prefects and Harry rolled his eyes. He didn't particularly care who the prefects were. They wore badges: it would be obvious what they were when he saw them. Hedwig made a quiet noise and he could make out the psychic scent of her annoyed amusement. He tilted his head slightly and gave her a look. She returned it with an expression that reminded him of a human raising an eyebrow. She made an owl-snort or disgust and lifted her beak haughtily. He shrugged in return.

"We're supposed to patrol the corridors every so often," Ron was saying and Harry was startled to realize that he was the one that Ron was speaking to, "and we can give out punishments if people are misbehaving. I can't wait to get Crabbe and Goyle for something..."

"You're not supposed to abuse your position, Ron!" Hermione scolded furiously.

Harry disliked the spiciness in her psychic scent that whispered of self-righteousness and spoke suddenly, "He never said he was going to abuse his position, Hermione." She stared in shock as he continued to reprimand her like she was a first-year. "It is a well-known and public fact that Ron does not like Vincent Crabbe nor Gregory Goyle. If he chose to express that he would not mind being the one to give them detentions that they deserve then it is his business and not yours. You are both prefects so it is apparent that Ron must have some ability to behave responsibly or else he would not have received the position." Kirra looked proud at his speech and Harry was aware that he had shocked his friends with the sheer quantity of what he had said. He felt a twinge of guilt that he hadn't been speaking to them much but ignored it in favour of sending them both stern and irritated looks. "Now if you don't mind, could everyone please stop lecturing each other? I, myself, will stop as well." And Harry was silent.

The ride fell into an awkward sort of silence in which Hermione shifted nervously, glancing at the literary choice of the newest addition to Hogwarts. She wrinkled her nose in disgust at the copy of The Quibbler perched on Kirra's crossed legs as the blonde continued to scribble away in delight at the quiz.

"Anything good in there?" Ron cast out, breaking the silence.

"Of course not," Hermione snapped. "The Quibbler's rubbish. Everyone knows that."

"Excuse me," Luna said coldly. Harry shook his head to rid himself of the strange feeling of something shifting and causing a strange pulse along the Sapphire. The girl's eyes were sharp and hard as ice. "My father is the editor."

"I like your father," Kirra commented absently, only half-listening to the conversation around her. "He makes good coffee. Do you still want that experimental Nargle-be-Gone for the holiday season?"

Luna looked at the girl for a moment longer before she answered Kirra. "I'll be sure to tell him and that would be lovely. Nargles are

really rather bothersome." Her eyes misted over at the end and Kirra looked up in confusion at the tense atmosphere that followed.

"So...anyone going to fill me in?"

The compartment was filled with casual talk after that. Harry forced himself to smile and to chuckle at jokes but his heart wasn't behind the gestures. His heart was fixed on the words Daemon had told him and on the things he had seen and felt. A shiver ran down his spine and his magical core trembled under the pressure of his thoughts. He reached out for Kirra's dark power and she gave it without an outward show of what she was doing for him. He exhaled softly at the relief and slouched into his seat.

"Hey, Harry," he heard Ginny's murmur even over the laughter and chatter of the compartment. "You okay?"

He bristled at the question. Of course he was okay! He looked at her sharply but his resolve to snap at her wilted when he only saw honest concern. She wasn't pressing him for answers about his feelings and she didn't appear to need him to answer - she was asking for her own piece of mind, no matter what the answer was.

"Not really." He gave a crooked half-smile. "But don't go spreading it around." He wasn't exactly joking at the last.

She smirked. "Wouldn't want what few fans you have left to hate you, would we?"

"No, we wouldn't," he agreed, nodding sagely. She snickered. "Marriage proposals are always so much nicer than death threats."

"Of course. What male wouldn't want to be able to take his pick of every woman in the wizarding world?"

"I know of a few." Ginny snapped her head around to look at his faraway smirk. "Kirra introduced us while we were visiting Terreille. It's not a very nice place but it is recovering."

"Are these males married or committed?" she asked suspiciously. His smirk widened.

"Neither. All perfectly single." Ginny grinned as she caught on almost instantly. Harry nodded and gave a short theatrical shudder. "As I was told many a time."

He was on the receiving end of many bewildered looks when Ginny collapsed into giggles.

Kirra waited silently behind the first-years. She could hear the whispers of the other students, wondering who she was and wondering why she was at Hogwarts and waiting with the first-years. When her name was called, Minerva McGonagall informed the students that she was joining them after being home-schooled for her younger years. They lapped up the excuse and the young Queen strode up, eyes fixed upon the ratty Sorting Hat. Her black school robes shifted as she sat down on the unstable looking stool. The hat was set upon her head and she held her barriers when she felt it try and slip past them.

It recoiled in shock before it brushed against her barriers reverently and with a little hesitance. She reached out a tendril of power and searched for ill-intent. Upon finding none she opened her barriers and allowed it entry. She felt it touch each of her memories and taste the flavour of her emotions and of her soul. It finally spoke.

"You could go anywhere, if you truly wished it." The voice was ancient but not so ancient as her mother's voice. She tipped her head slightly in acknowledgement. "I would normally search for which house you want to be in and place you there but it seems as if you do not have an opinion of any of Hogwarts' houses."

"That is correct," she murmured.

The hat shifted on her head as it nodded to itself. "Then you must see the dilemma I am faced with. My only task, my only duty, in this world is to sort the students into their house and to warn them of the things I know will come to be. I am a Seer trapped in a sightless form and I cannot be if I do not continue with my task."

"Then sort me where you wish," she told it. Her lips curled in amusement. "Unless you believe that I care where I am placed?"

The hat snorted. "Cheeky one, this is," he muttered loud enough for the rest of the hall to hear. Never, in all the years at Hogwarts, had the Sorting Hat ever spoken aloud aside from its song and the house that the current student was sorted in. Whispers broke out and Albus Dumbledore stiffened in his seat. "Wherever I want aye?" When she sent affirmation floating across their linked minds, the hat sent a sense of happiness and pride. "Well then, best be...RAVENCLAW!"

Kirra slipped the hat one fleeting memory just as she pulled it off and handed it to the waiting McGonagall. She felt the surprise and heard its cry cut out as the link between their minds was snapped by her barriers rising once more. She walked towards the blue and silver decorated table and sat beside Luna, smiling at her.

"This should be fun, eh?"

Rex heaved a human-like sigh and shifted on his perch. He was, by far, one of the largest birds in the owlery. Only eagle owls held anything against him and they couldn't truly compete. He shifted from foot to foot and glanced down at the golden circlet that held the soft warm glow of his Tiger Eye jewel. He could remember with startling clarity the day he had received his Birthright Jewel.

He had returned to his usual perch in the gnarled lightning-struck tree and had been settling down for the night. The owl he shared his territory with had been stretching and preparing for the night's hunting across the field and Rex hadn't been about to let his guard down simply because the field was no longer his to hunt. A family of jays had settled into a nest outside of the field but they were still of the impression that Rex did not belong in his own territory and had taken to chasing him ruthlessly. He and the owl had come to an agreement on the family (luckily the owl had that little bit more that made such communications easier) and they would help the other if they were truly in danger. Unfortunately this agreement was blurred during the between time of dawn and dusk. 'Danger' to the two hunters meant that they would be able to hunt during their allotted times. But if they were attacked during dawn or dusk then the time was being transferred to the other so the danger of being unable to hunt

depended on whose turn it was to hunt. Dusk was the time when Rex would be the one to need help if the jays decided to attack and dawn was the time when the owl would be in that situation.

He had been shuffling along the branch towards the deep crack he took shelter in for the nights and was startled to find shining white rocks in his nesting place. Being a hunter meant he looked for movement and not for difference but even though the stones couldn't move he still was drawn to them. They had glinted and glimmered and had looked so very much like they could move that Rex had forgotten that he was vulnerable.

The jays had attacked.

When he had woken he had found himself in a cage. The owl had told him of cages (he was rather welcoming to certain owls when they flew through the territory during his time and had gathered many stories that he shared, on occasion, with Rex during dusk) and so Rex knew very well what he was in. The humans - witches and wizards, he found out later - had nursed him back to health and were then under the impression that he was a magical bird. He had wondered what they meant until he had seen the glimmering white stones again and glared at them. It had been their fault he was in a cage!

The humans had taken those rocks and locked them away and Rex had felt very strange after that. He had felt sick and weak and some part of him was longing for those stupid stones in a way akin to how he felt during mating season. He had grown worse progressively until he had been sold to that horrible store with all the stupid creatures who knew nothing of being free. They only wanted to be bought and taken home.

Rex did not. He wanted those stupid stones that had put him in a cage and he wanted them now! But he hadn't gotten them and his condition worsened until the female human who ran the store (for that was where he was) had put his cage in the very back so that his appearance didn't scare away customers.

It was the autumn-haired girl who had saved him. Rex had known there was something special about that girl and had tried to get her attention. Something was with that girl and he wanted that something almost as much as he wanted the white stones. The girl had left in a fury and had returned with the something-who-was-actually-a-someone.

That someone turned out to be called Kirra and she had been very happy indeed to buy him and take him with her. She had somehow even gotten those horrible-wonderful white stones that Rex hated-loved.

Kirra had taught him that he was a Warlord and that the white stones were his Birthright Jewels. She had taught him basic craft and had introduced him to the Kindred from her home in her realm. There he had undergone the special Kindred ritual that was the human equivalent of an Offering to the Darkness and had received the Tiger Eye jewel. He still had his White jewel but now it had been set into a band around his leg instead of the circlet around his neck. The Tiger Eye was set into his circlet instead and he wore the jewel with pride.

Rex, currently, wasn't very happy with his new living arrangements. The owlery was full of the night dwelling birds and, while he tolerated them and even liked a few (Hedwig and the adorably welcoming Pigwidgeon) but he missed having his own field with only one other hunter to share with or his field at the Hall in the North Woods where the wolves lived. They were kind enough to occasionally bring him food when he was tired from practising his Craft with the Kindred who lived in the actual Hall. They understood his need to solitude and avoided him most of the time.

But most of all he missed his Queen. He could sense her, just down in the Great Hall and with the witch who resembled the Strange One, not too far away that he couldn't go to her. He missed the dark presence and the way she treated him - as though he were a human who deserved her respect and was her equal - and most of all he missed being able to have the choice of civilization and the outside world.

When he was with Kirra, he could choose to stay near her or he could choose to fly off and do what he wished. As long as he returned when she asked, she didn't mind him leaving for long periods of time and wouldn't question his absences. In return for this kindness (as he did technically owe her his life), he would spend approximately half of his time with her.

Hedwig flew up to him like a feathered ghost and perched alongside him. He watched her ruffle her feathers as she settled and cooed in amusement. She gave him a scowl-glare. What's so funny? She demanded in a series of hoots. She was half-Blood and may have not been able to speak mind-to-mind but she was still a bird and so was he so they could understand each other when they spoke their natural language.

Nothing. You just look a little silly when you ruffle your feathers like that, he replied in what he hoped was an assuring tone. It was a little difficult to change the affliction on his speech to match the one that she used.

So says the one who is unable to keep his feathers neat around a simple circlet, she retorted. It was true though; Rex did have problems keeping his feathers in their proper order when the circlet with his Tiger Eye shifted. Hedwig had worn a silver circlet (not actually made of silver but it looked it - her human was friends with a male who could not be near silver for some reason that Rex was not aware of) during their stay in Kaeleer so that other Kindred and Blood did not mistake her for a meal.

Touche, he agreed, dipping down in a bow that was an equivalent of a nod. I concede Lady Hedwig.

She made a short noise that could be equated to a human's snort. How very smart of you Lord Rex.

He chirped cheerfully and stretched out a wing to bump her good-naturedly. I had thought so. Now, care for a bit of a flight before dusk? I wish to stretch my wings but I am not prepared to do so when there is an entire tower of owls.

As long as you don't mind me leaving you when you are ready to return to the roost, she agreed, though she still shot him a reproachful look for bumping into her. I am not prepared to give up my dinner just because you are uncomfortable around a few common mail birds.

TBC...

Chapter#10

Harry rose from bed caked in sweat. His emerald eyes narrowed dangerously in annoyance. He was over the fear and hesitation now but had moved onto fierce annoyance that bordered on anger. His Sapphire Jewel flashed on his hand and he took a series of deep calming breaths before summoning his wizard's magic and flicking his wand at the sweat-damp sheets and pajamas, muttering a cleaning spell without much conviction. It did its job though, so he got up and opened his trunk. His roommates continued to sleep, oblivious to his wakefulness. He had grown accustomed to waking early for weapons training with Daemonar (no matter how much he disliked it) and so had continued with the early morning wake-up routine. He had moved his school robes (new and designed specifically for him by the seamstresses in Dharo who based them off of his older robes) to the first compartment before leaving Kaeleer so when he opened the trunk he was greeted by the sight of his robes folded neatly on one side and his school things organized on the other. He picked out a pair of robes - they were identical so it didn't matter which - and walked into the dorm bathroom.

As the hot water washed over his body he scowled. After so many weeks of being dunked into freezing ponds, lakes, water troughs, streams, showers... well, frigid water in any case, he had grown used to starting his morning with a cold wash. Unfortunately for him the house elves were of the opinion that all teenagers wanted hot water for their showers. Harry let loose the growl that was rising in his throat and endured the heat for only the few minutes it took to clean and then wash his hair before he left the shower stall and dried himself with a bit of Craft. After banishing his pajamas to the hamper in his trunk, he dressed in his school robes.

He was gathering his books and packing them into his magically expanded book-bag (a gift from Jaenelle once she had found out that he actually enjoyed reading unlike her brother, Lucivar) and his roommates were still sleeping. He shook his head at them and hefted his bag, intending to go down early for breakfast.

He exited the Gryffindor tower and smiled briefly at the Fat Lady, bowing to her. "Good morning, lady." He greeted merrily. She

blushed at the unaccustomed title from a student and his smile turned to a satisfied grin as he continued on his way. He had found that, since realizing his Blood heritage, females brought him pleasure in a way they never had before. Even when he was annoyed with him there was some base instinct that hummed in appreciation for their presence.

Upon entering the Great Hall he promptly surveyed it for exits and defensible areas before switching to scanning the students and evaluating their threat level. His eyes paused on Draco Malfoy who had glanced up sharply at his arrival. The blonde male narrowed his grey eyes in warning - clearly not awake enough to deal with him, even if he was awake - and Harry inclined his head a fraction in acknowledgement before sitting down at the Gryffindor house table.

The gleaming golden plates that lined the table were empty but the moment he sat before one the serving dishes within reach filled themselves with food. Harry's stomach protested almost immediately at the sight of so much food and he only took a little. In the area of the castle he supposed the Ravenclaw dormitory was, he could feel Kirra's steady beat of black power. In the owlery he could feel the presence of the Warlord eagle Rex as well as Hedwig's own flicker of Blood. He pressed a question onto his loyal familiar, wondering if she had any mail. He felt her acknowledge the mind-press (as she wasn't fully Blood he couldn't actually make the connection so this bit of feeling and brief flashes of images had to serve them) and send back an affirmative. He used Craft to enhance his senses and managed to make out the soft hoot as she soared into the hall, clutching a deep red-velvet pouch in her talons.

"What have you got for me there, girl?" he murmured softly, feeding her some water and a few owl treats he surreptitiously called in into his trouser pocket so that he wouldn't arouse suspicion. She accepted them and shot a vicious glare at the head table where Dumbledore already sat with Professor McGonagall. His head of house was startled at the piercing stare of hate coming from such a polite and courteous owl but he paid neither of them heed. Hedwig was always making her opinion known and his head of house was very feline.

He was frowning at the seal on the pouch. Gringotts. Why would Gringotts be sending him anything? "Any explanation little lady?" he asked, stroking his fingers along her back affectionately. She turned her attention to her human male and chirped cheerfully. He saw the image of a wrinkled and rather large goblin in a black coat flash across his mind followed by the image of a nameplate 'Knotjaw' in neat copper script on a black panel. His sight returned to the Great Hall and he was staring into the expectant gaze of his owl. "Thanks," he murmured, petting her gently. "You've been very helpful little lady."

Her smug look made him laugh and he sent her off with a last gentle stroke. He watched her snowy form glide silently through the beautiful illusion that spread across the ceiling and out the massive owl-window. The velvet pouch called for his attention and he opened it carefully. Inside were two letters - one sealed with the usual golden seal of Gringotts and the other with an unfamiliar seal depicting a medieval-styled gryphon of black on a shield that was half scarlet and half gold, divided on a diagonal by a strip of white. Harry puzzled over the insignia and vanished to his desk in his private trunk-library for him to read later. The second he pulled out and opened with a touch of Craft so that the seal wasn't damaged. Kirra had told him, once, that the goblins were always so much more forthcoming when you kept record of each of their letters and did not break the wax seal nor tear the expensive parchment they wrote on.

He unfolded the letter and furrowed his brow when he caught the whisper of a dark female psychic scent - indicating that a powerful witch had been near when the letter was being composed. Shrugging it off he cast a glance at the head table, determined none of the present professors were suspicious of his letter, it was then that he began to read:

Mr. Potter, (goblins never used silly greetings like 'dear' to begin a letter to a client)

It has been pointed out to Gringotts that your account with us has been suffering regular withdrawals that cannot be accounted for. We suspect fraud. (Trust goblins to get straight to the point) Following bank protocol, your Trust Account will be frozen until such a time

comes that we can account for all stolen funds and calculate your remaining Trust Assets.

As we have come to understand this Trust Account is your sole income Gringotts has employed the Young Lord Heir Act accordingly. This allows you to gain most rights and privileges available to those who are of Age. For full details about the Young Lord Heir Act, come to Gringotts and ask for your account manager at your earliest convenience.

Also enclosed is a letter written containing an explanation of your immediate inheritance. We suspect that you were never informed, though this was in no part the fault of Gringotts. Perhaps next time, Mr Potter, you should be more aware of who has access to your accounts without your express permission. Gringotts only gives you this benefit of the doubt at the personal request of one of our most prestigious clients.

Sincerely, (He figured this was mostly a formality that the goblins only submitted to in order to increase their revenue from customers)

Stunned, Harry reread the letter before placing a Sapphire barrier around it that would not allow anyone to read it but him and anyone who wore a darker jewel than his own. He added a secrecy spell with a tap of his wand so that regular wizards would have even more trouble. This letter was vanished to his desk as well and he returned to his breakfast as though nothing had been best to not let on to what he knew.

"Harry!" Kirra dropped beside him and he shook his head in amusement upon sighting her grumpy look. "How come you never told me classes started at quarter to nine?"

"I asked Daemonar to tell you," he informed her, passing over a large mug of coffee that had appeared. "Apparently he forgot."

"Daemonar..." she growled, accepting the mug and drinking absently as she continued to glare as though the male was on the receiving end. "I'm going to kill him."

"Have fun," he called after her as she stalked over to her own table. Harry shook his head again and returned to his breakfast. His stomach rebelled the moment he took another bite and he ceased trying. There was no point forcing himself to eat as it would only cause more harm than good.

The great hall slowly began to fill up. Harry startled many by being awake and present so early in the morning. He received fearful looks, dark glares, beaming smiles and coy little looks. He ignored most of them and returned a few smiles to those he knew were sincere (Luna and Neville really, as Ron and Hermione were still up in the tower). He invited Neville to join him and the boy had hesitated, sharpening Harry's lightly simmering temper for a moment.

"I understand if you don't want to," said Harry tersely.

"No, no!" Neville hurried, waving his hands and smiling reassuringly. "It's not that. It's just I've promised Ginny that I would sit with her..."

Harry felt his temper fail and embarrassment and shame rise up. How could he have thought that sweet (devious - he wasn't stupid), kind, and caring Neville would have believed those stupid Prophet articles about him? He gave soft smile and nodded in understanding. "She could sit with us?" he offered.

Neville beamed and nodded, "Okay then!", and sat down across from him.

They chatted easily for a while before Ginny flounced over and planted herself on the bench beside Neville. "Morning!" she chirped. "Everyone ready for classes today?"

Neville rolled his eyes and mumbled, "Would you be happy to have Snape for potions in the morning?"

"Well..." Ginny grinned at him, eyes flashing wickedly. "He doesn't seem to mind me."

"That's because you don't melt your cauldrons weekly," Neville shot back. Ginny smirked.

"Naturally. Of course, I'm also not the one who's trying to get himself kicked out of the class." Harry looked up sharply.

"You're trying to get kicked out of class?" he asked curiously.

Neville blushed sheepishly. "It's not as though I actually like Potions..." he muttered. "I want to go into Herbology as a researcher...maybe some breeding or something... I don't need Potions to do that but my grandmother won't let me stop taking it."

Harry mused over this before he nodded with a slow smile. "Makes sense, I suppose," he murmured with approval. "How very Slytherin of you."

Neville raised a brow but grinned anyways. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should," Harry agreed sagely, eyes sparkling with repressed amusement. "Have I ever told you that the hat wanted to put me in Slytherin?"

Ginny snickered. "No, but I think I had that one figured out in my first year." She winked mischievously. "Chamber of Secrets and all that."

"It certainly explains a lot." Neville gave a half-smile. "Especially why you're hiding in plain sight from Hermione and Ron."

Harry rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. "With the way those two trail me, I'm surprised I didn't do it sooner. They're both under some strange misconception that I need to tell them everything or else I'll explode."

"Which you did," Ginny reminded him cheekily. "The whole house heard it, you know?"

"Did they?" Harry looked over at her and met the warm cinnamon eyes. "I might have noticed some tip-toeing before I left. It was rather annoying." She smirked in reply.

"Did you now? And they were so certain it would keep you calm..."

"Why do I feel as though I'm missing some huge, secret, inside-joke type thing?" Neville asked to the open air, ignoring the half-apologetic looks the two were sending him. "Because really, if you don't want to tell me, you don't have to."

"Oh it's nothing Neville," Ginny assured him, patting his shoulder with a grin. "Harry just spent the summer with us, is all. When he came, he threw a right fit about lack of information while he was at the Dursleys. I agree with him, though," she added, when Harry began to look annoyed, "I saw their letters, after all, and they really could have said more. 'They' being Hermione and Ron, of course."

"Well now it's clearer." The pudgy boy grinned widely. "I feel sorry for you mate."

"I feel sorry for myself, actually," said Harry airily. "In a backwards, sort-of manner."

They two across from him laughed and it wasn't long before Harry joined in with a few chuckles. His temper was still there and he was prepared to unleash it, if necessary, but his amusement and contentment was bubbling to the surface. He delighted in the pleasant female company (as opposed to the slightly nagging, unnerving presence Hermione often presented - though she was still a good friend) and the steady calmness that Neville held even as he stuttered.

They chatted amicably for a few more minutes but the easy feelings were soon interrupted by the arrival of the other two-thirds of the Golden Trio. They promptly sat down on either side of Harry and began to override his current conversation over which class was their favourite and why. Neville's had been, unsurprisingly, Herbology. Harry had said he enjoyed Defence Against the Dark Arts but that he wasn't so sure it would be his favourite class with the Ministry assigned Professor, and Ginny had surprised them both by saying that Potions was her favourite. Her reasoning was that it was a very artistic form of magic - requiring skill and precision as well as a flair of creativity. It also was entertaining to watch Snape skulk about the

class and scare the others in her year (nothing really scared her, she said, after facing/controlling the Basilisk in her first year).

"Where were you Harry? We looked all over the tower and couldn't find you?" Ron demanded immediately, plowing over Neville's complaint about how on earth Ginny had managed to get into Snape's good books.

Harry frowned at his red-haired friend. "I woke up early, Ron," he informed him with a surprising amount of patience. "I came down early for breakfast and then got into a conversation with Ginny and Neville." He tilted his head pointedly towards the two across from him. Ron didn't get the hint and neither did the usually perceptive Hermione.

"You shouldn't go off like that on your own, Harry!" she scolded. "Not with You-Know-Who back!"

Harry did not dignify her with an answer. He had decided, after many complaints from Kirra, to try and promote the use of Voldemort's name and none of the silly pseudo name nonsense (she had complained that You-Know-Who was too open for interpretation, such as in gossip... 'did you hear? You-know-who likes blondes!', 'oh my god? Really!'... and the like). So he was no longer responding to anyone who used one of the various pseudo names. Why Hermione, a muggleborn, followed the tradition was beyond him. She had only even heard about Voldemort when she had found out she was a witch, which didn't offer up much time for her to pick up the habit. Harry hadn't, why did she?

"So, Ginny, following Neville's train of thought, how exactly did you get into Snape's good books?" he queried, completely disregarding the annoyed and partially angry looks the other members of the Golden Trio gave him.

Her eyes glinted in amusement, but at the question or the situation, Harry wasn't sure. "It's rather easy. I answer all his questions precise and to the point, make my potions properly, and make sure I have more than one sample when he's collecting. It's a bonus if you write little half-snide comments about you, Harry."

"That's a joke right?" Harry pleaded, eyes comically wide. "Please say you're joking."

She laughed. "Of course I am...or am I?" He rolled his eyes as the girl snorted and dissolved into a fit of laughter.

Ron glanced to the boy between he and Hermione. Harry was studiously ignoring both of them and had been since breakfast. The second-youngest Weasley had even seen the green-eyed male looking for a spot away from the two of them when they had first entered. Fortunately, as the only spot also happened to be near Malfoy, Harry had sat with them. When Snape had given them their instructions, the younger male had immediately begun with a sort of practised ease that Ron had never seen before.

When Harry left to collect more ingredients while his potion simmered, Ron turned to the female portion of their trio and spoke. "What's upset him, you reckon?"

"I don't know Ron," she snapped, furiously trying to keep up with Harry's speed in making the potion. Whatever the boy was doing, it seemed to be helping him make his potion at a level Snape would probably have made at the same age. Hermione's was textbook perfect but Harry's was still better. Ron didn't know why but suspected the involvement of whoever Harry had been with all summer. "I'm trying to concentrate and you should be too!"

"5 points from Gryffindor for speaking in class." Snape scowled at the two of them from across the room. "Each."

Ron was ready to complain but Harry returned at that moment and stomped on his foot sharply, glaring heatedly. Ron cowed under the withering look. It said 'say one more word that will lose us points and I'll hex you'; Hermione was giving him a similar look. Harry stared at him for a moment longer before returning to his task.

Ron sighed and turned back to his own cauldron. It was a faintly green and he feverishly dove back into the instructions in an attempt to save it. Aside from Snape taking points from Gryffindor at the beginning, nothing entertaining happened during the class (not that

Ron would have noticed, as everyone was utterly focussed on the difficult potion). He Glanced around nervously when his potion began emitting faintly green smoke.

Hermione's was the textbook designated colour while Harry's was emitting a shimmering silver vapour. For a moment, Ron felt ecstatic that Harry would be earning a low mark with him (and promptly felt bad for it a second later) but then Snape ruined the experience for him.

"Your potions should now be emitting a light silver vapour," he informed them coolly, with ten minutes of class left to go. Ron's optimism wilted and shame at the optimism blossomed.

Their Professor strolled through the rows with a sort of sick delight as he pointed out every mistake in every cauldron - Slytherins excepted, of course. When he came to their table he sneered at Ron's green-spark emitting potion and then turned to Harry's. The boy-who-lived met the greasy-haired man's stare levelly and held it until Snape glanced down at the potion between them. Ron took a perverse delight in the shock that registered on Snape's face for the barest of moments before the sneer was back in place once more.

"Well, well, it looks like Mr Potter has finally managed to do something correctly. No doubt due to Ms Granger's help," he added snidely. "10 points from Gryffindor for cheating, Mr Potter." Harry did not react, simply blinked and inclined his head fractionally in acknowledgment of the deduction. Snape sneered once more and glared at Hermione's potion as though wishing something was wrong before returning to the front of the room.

"Fill on flagon with a sample of your potion, label it clearly with you name and bring it up to my desk for testing. Homework: 12 inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making, to be handed in on Thursday." Everyone filled their flagons and brought them up to Snape's desk. Ron shivered when Harry brushed past him coldly and quickly gathered his things, intending to catch up with the other boy as he strode out of class, determinedly still ignoring him.

"Hey Harry! Wait!" He jogged to catch up to Harry but the boy had stopped and Ron went a couple feet ahead of him before he stopped and turned around, falling back into place beside Harry. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded. "And how did you get your potion so good? You're rubbish at potions."

"I studied over the summer," Harry informed him with a cold glint in his green eyes. Ron felt a shiver, of fear this time, run up his spine at the flash of power he witnessed simmering behind the male's guarded gaze. "Perhaps you should have done the same." He left.

Ron watched him go and was surprised and upset when Harry stopped and smiled as Ginny, accompanied by that girl, Kirra, called out to Harry. He waited for them to reach him before he bowed slightly to both ladies and then said something that made them both grin. He accepted their bags a moment later and slung them over his shoulder before offering an arm to each. They linked their arms through his and Ginny said something that made a blush rise to Harry's face and for Kirra to grin wickedly and smirk. The trio mostly comprised of females continued on their way and slowed when Neville came up. The pudgy boy smiled amicably at all three and trailed along beside them, beaming as Harry began to chat easily with all of them.

Ron felt jealousy rise up and another feeling he couldn't place. Whatever the feeling was, it was making him upset that Harry had ignored him and was instead surrounding himself and - it looked suspiciously like - flirting with others. A thought crossed his mind but he squashed it ruthlessly and waited alone for Hermione to leave the class.

"Where's Harry?" she asked with a frown, the moment she was at his side.

"Gone to lunch already," Ron grunted, mind still replaying the light look of happiness that had vanished the cold stare Harry had worn before. "With Neville, my sister, and that Kirra girl, no less."

"Kirra?" Hermione frowned. "I don't think it wise for Harry to spend so much time with her."

"Oh? Why not?" asked Ron.

Hermione shook her head and continued to frown. She did not answer his question - but she did chat with him - at all on their way down up to lunch.

Neville sighed and tried very hard to pay attention to Professor Binns. It wasn't working. The ghost was simply too boring and too monotone for him to pay attention to. He wished that the History of Magic professor could be engaging like the Herbology professor. Professor Sprout was bubbly and cheerful and she loved her profession. Neville adored her and he adored her class - dirt, stink and all. He loved being able to abandon his books - which he also loved but found difficult due to a minor case of dyslexia - and work with his hands to help something grow and live. It was an empowering feeling, to know that it was through his hard work and his care that the plants (beautiful or deadly or boring plants) prospered and turned into what they were today.

He loved learning about the different uses of the plants he raised. He loved learning about where they came from, who discovered them, how they interacted with the creatures that lived near them, their benefits and their disadvantages. He loved his experiments with breeding two different plants together. Those experiments were the ones that had finally convinced his grandmother to allow him to pursue Herbology - as long as he also followed the classes she wanted him to take as well.

Neville turned his head to stare out the window towards the Herbology greenhouses. He sighed wistfully at the view and continued to stare longingly. Longbottom Manor was a beautiful home on beautiful lands. The Manor itself wasn't very large - at least, not by old pureblood standards. It had three floors and ten bedrooms, five of them with en-suite bathrooms, one all-purpose ballroom, two dining rooms - formal and informal, a kitchen, a small library, and a study. The study was for the family Patriarch. At the moment, it was his grandmother and, when he came of age, it would be Neville himself.

But all those things weren't what Neville cared about. He cared about the sprawling acres of lush fields and wild forests, of roaring rivers

and winding streams and even of the stinky swamps. He loved the untamed plants but, even with the diversity, Neville couldn't raise and breed his exotic plants - the ones Professor Sprout gifted him with and kept for him at Hogwarts. The Manor was lovely but it didn't have the greenhouses he so desperately wished for. He had the money for it - well, his family did in any case - but they wouldn't build him even a small greenhouse. They wanted him to be an Auror just like his parents. Never mind that he had the strongest affinity to the earth that had been seen in the Longbottom family for several centuries. Never mind that he could feel his magic straining at the bonds placed on it until he reached magical maturity, never mind that his magic was focussed only on connecting him to the earth and to the living things that lived on it, never mind that he had been offered numerous positions after Hogwarts in the field of Herbology. No, his parents had been Aurors and he was supposed to be one as well.

He started as the bell rang and hastily gathered his books. Potions was next and, as per usual, his potion was a disaster. It really was rather amusing to reverse the stirring directions and put ingredients in backwards. Snape was a right git and Neville cowered under the various glares he received. He wasn't actually afraid (his Boggart had only turned into Snape because he was afraid of the man finding out about his constant sabotage) of the potions master but he certainly wasn't about to come right out and tell him he only failed at all his potions in an attempt to get kicked out of class.

The class finished and Neville had to say he wasn't surprised at Harry leaving the rest of the Golden Trio behind. He shrugged and continued to walk down the hall at a leisurely pace. A flash of vibrant red and a splash of white-blond later and he was jogging to catch up to the green-eyed male. Ginny and Kirra turned to face him and beamed.

"Hey Neville!" Ginny greeted, linking her free arm through his and tugging him along. "How was potions?"

"Yes Neville, how exactly did you manage to screw up your potion quite so well?" Harry smirked at him, eyes glinting in wicked amusement. Kirra peered around the lean body and wore an eager expression.

Neville shrugged sheepishly. "I went about it backwards." His audience laughed and he beamed at the three. He liked this Harry far more than the Harry of previous years. This Harry had a wonderfully sarcastic sense of humour and he didn't try to hide the fact that he had secrets. He made sure that anyone who asked knew that he had them and that he wasn't about to share them with the world just because he was asked too. This Harry paid attention to those who he had ignored in favour of the Golden Trio and this Harry wore clothes that fit.

Neville nodded his head at something Ginny and Kirra had been retelling together while inside he chuckled. That last had been particularly entertaining. Neville had seen Harry when he had come aboard the platform and he has seen the numerous stares the boy had received for the new clothing. All of it show just enough muscle to keep the lookers curious while still satisfying their need for a good view. Harry, Neville had decided, had a very nice ass.

Ginny looked over and raised a brow. Neville shot her a silencing look and she smirked but did not mention his appreciative look. It wouldn't go very well for Neville if the truth about his interests go out. He had known, since his third year, that he was bisexual. He leaned a little more towards the females but there were a number of male students that had caught his eye as well. Unfortunately, the only place that his likes would be accepted would be in the old pureblood families, and only as long as he was married and with an heir and those likes were background relationships that everyone agreed not to mention. Mainstream wizarding culture was very much against bi- and homosexuality. The old pureblood families only got away with it because so many of them were loyal to the twisted Lord Voldemort, who did not care what they did as long as he was provided with their heirs as his loyal servants . As he was not prepared to do any of those things, he kept quiet about it and enjoyed the view that his male peers unknowingly provided him.

"All right there, Neville?" Harry queried. Neville met Harry's eyes and was startled at the knowing amusement that played across his face. / You don't have to worry. I won't say anything and I don't mind you looking, if you want. / The shy Gryffindor yelped and jumped back at

the sudden play of Harry's voice in his mind. The smaller boy (he had the light but muscled build of a seeker and stood a fair few inches smaller than Neville) raised an eyebrow and smirked. "A little jumpy aren't you?"

"You - I - my - head!" was all that Neville managed to get out. Harry laughed and Ginny shook her head. Kirra looked between the two and then cackled, icy blue orbs sharpened in feral amusement. "How?"

"Kirra taught me," he murmured, holding out a hand to help Neville to his feet. He accepted it and stood slowly, flicking a curious look towards the Ravenclaw. "Not many people can do it but there are a few who can and they can use it with those who don't. You couldn't speak to me back, though," he added.

Ginny nodded sagely at this new development. "It's one of those Harry Things," she declared. The serious look on her face made them all burst out laughing once more. When they finally calmed down they eventually made it to the Great Hall and had their lunch. Easy chatter and friendship helped soothe the aching call of the Earth on Neville's magic and he immersed himself in it without a second thought, delighting in the calm and ease that spread through his body.

TBC...

Chapter#11

The second mirror in less than a century examined the Kindred before him. The Kindred trusted him to deliver their messages because he was the strongest one who was not bound to anyone other than their Lady. They did not trust him because they knew better than most when a male was hungry. Above all else, they knew that while Blood sang to Blood, so did other more worrisome things in the world and this particular mirror understood that almost as well as they did.

"My little Ladies," he murmured quietly. "Why do you ask this of me?"

/ Because you are the Sightless Seer. / The blind tiger, a Grey Jeweled Black Widow, was pristine white against the black of the night. Her ashen coat gleamed like a second moon and her eyes, pale blue with a white film covering them, stared blankly at his chest, where his Black Jewel glinted darkly. Beside her - and at least twice her size - stood the fiery-coloured Warlord Prince who had named himself her protector. He was remaining silent but his posture spoke of defiance. Legacy stood off to the side, golden gaze staring intently at the exchange. / Because you will recognize the Dream when you see it. /

"What dream am I to see? Is it the second or the first?" Everyone knew to treat Valari with respect and to return her courtesy of trying to communicate clearly.

/ The third and the fourth, of course. / The gentle communication thread was sincerely puzzled. / There have only been the third and fourth; what do you mean speaking of a first and second? ./

Lucien blinked in confusion. No first or second dream? What in hell did Valari mean by that? The second tiger gave a soft snarl of warning. He would not permit his Lady to be doubted. She may a resident of the Twisted Kingdom but she was his and he would not let this two-legged-feline try and discount his Lady's visions. Lucien caught the challenging yellow stare and narrowed his eyes. He was the son of Daemon SaDiablo and Jaenelle SaDiablo and he would not be intimidated by a Rose Jeweled tiger - Warlord Prince or not.

Legacy silenced the impending argument with a sharp snarl and a snap of her jaws. / No fighting. Valari is kind to tell such things to the Prince. / Her reprimand was so full of disapproval that it made Lucien want to wince. Legacy hardly got angry with anyone but when she did it made him feel as though he'd kicked a kitten or something equally cruel. / Prince... /

"Many thanks to you Lady Valari," he murmured, bowing politely. The Black Widow looked off to the side and made an inquiring noise of empty air.

/ Is it that time already? ./ she asked vaguely. / Can you hear the song Prince? ./

/ Time to return to the den, Lady. / Her escort/guard made a worried growl and nudged the smaller female gently. She swayed at the pressure and Lucien was unsettled to see the motion. It reminded him far too much of his grandmother's often haggard appearance and her random visits that served no real purpose. Legacy's tail swung once and he caught the flash of righteous anger in her psychic scent that told him exactly what she thought of Valari's state of health. The male tiger stiffened and his head dropped in shame under the Healer's withering glare. / Lady Legacy. Prince. /

/ Valari. Prince Moonfang/ Legacy returned but her tone was frosty when she stared at the male Kindred.

"Lady Valari. Prince." The burnt-orange tiger led the pale female away, presumably in the direction of her den. It was one of the few things they had managed to convince the Black Widow of; that a den was a good thing and that she could store her webs away there with the help of a few of the Dream Weavers. The race of golden spiders never minded helping their unguided sisters and they loved Valari for her gift to See without actually seeing.

Lucien waited until they were gone before he decided to return home. Legacy followed him until they reached the front door to the Hall. She departed there with the parting words to inform him that she had more than just him to speak with before the Lady sent her next letter.

Jaenelle beamed when the presence of a very familiar Warlord made its way steadily towards her bedroom window at the Keep. The brown-gold feathered form swooped into the room and banked sharply upon reaching the opposite wall before perching on the ornate stand the golden-haired Queen had called in at his entrance.

/ Lady Witch/ he greeted. He clicked his beak and two items were called in to hover in midair for her to take. One was a leather folder that no doubt held letters. The second was a plain wooden box that held whispers of two kinds of magic. / She asks that those be delivered to the Kindred and Hounds. / Jaenelle's lips quirked at the dignified and educated response. She had never minded the Kindred's simpler speech but it appeared that several of the Kindred minded their own speech. Rex fluffed his feathers impatiently. / Do you have a reply or can I leave? ./

"You may leave," Jaenelle assured him, taking the items into her arms. He bowed quickly and spread his wings. He was prepared to take flight once more when he paused. He clicked his beak again, as though contemplating something and not liking it, and a few thick tomes appeared. They dropped onto her bed and he flapped his wings once, quickly, in satisfaction before he took off.

/ Give those to the High Lord/ he called back before his Tiger-Eye Jewel flared and latched onto the beacon in the Darkness that would lead him back to Kirra on Earth. Jaenelle watched him leave before she turned to the folder and the box. If her instincts were correct then she would have quite a bit of work to do on her daughter's behalf.

She almost felt sorry for her papa, finding the similarities between the younger Queen and herself when she was younger...

...but, like she said, she almost felt sorry for him.

Daemon and his son walked through the North Woods with Legacy trotting along with them. He could feel the tension in his son, the same needing and wanting tension he had carried the whole time he had first arrived in Kaeleer after waking from the Twisted Kingdom. It was not quite as strong (but then again, very few things could reach the same level of need he had for his beautiful wife) but it was still quite potent. The green-gold eyes were fixed on the path at hand,

studiously ignoring his father's attempt at taking his mind off the female - or male, you never could be sure with Daemon's son, after all - that had gotten the younger Warlord Prince so worked up.

That was one of the reason's Legacy was following them. Lucien had just gone through the rut and it had been a particularly bad one. He had been forced to take his son deep into the North Woods of the Hall and to hold him there, encased in Twilight's Dawn shields reinforced with Black shields and a fair scattering of Webs to ensnare his son's mind and hold him down for Daemon to drag him back to the centre of their designated area. His normally composed son had fallen into a routine of destroying everything it could to expend the horrible violence. He had tried to fight against his father but his mother's careful planning had been sure to wear out his Black Jewels before the rut began so that he was fighting with the Red at best. Legacy had returned when the shields had come down and had immediately snarled the worse lupine-tongue-lashing that Daemon had ever seen.

The most entertaining part was watching his son flinch at every harsh word from the irrate Healer. Not that Daemon had very much to laugh about; he had faced Legacy once before and it had hurt almost as much as Jaenelle's scoldings. He knew better than to let his amusement show when the wolf was quite so furious with his son. According to the Kindred, anything that his and Lucivar's sons did was also their fault because they were the boy's fathers.

/ Prince will sleep/ she informed them both curtly. Daemon smiled at the young female but she scowled and snorted at him - dashing all hopes that he had harboured that she would forgive him for allowing his son (one of her many precious charges) to get hurt. / Prince SaDiablo will make words for the Lady and will tell truth about Prince. / The formal title made Daemon want to wince but he held the impulse back.

"Of course, Lady Legacy," he replied in a placating tone that usually worked with females.

/ Prince SaDiablo will not try and make Legacy be nice/ she snapped.
/ Legacy is angry with Prince SaDiablo for letting Prince make hurts. /

"I am sorry that my son got hurt, Lady Legacy," he tried again. He chanced a glance at his son and saw the younger male trying to hold back a smile through his weariness. "I did not mean for the situation to get out of control like it did." He really hadn't meant to break his son's leg or his arm but he had been desperate and even with a rage-filled mind he knew that Lucien wasn't fool enough to try and continue his attacks until pausing to try and at least wrap some of his power to hold the bones in place.

The female sniffed in disbelief and turned her attention to Lucien sharply when he coughed. Golden eyes glowed in the faint light as she whiffed curiously at the Warlord Prince and assessed his health clinically. / Prince has a cold. Maybe fever/ declared Legacy. / This was bad rutting time. /

"It was," Lucien agreed in a low breath. Daemon stared at him until his son looked up and their gazes locked. The elder was startled at the still burning hunger in the younger's eyes and stopped abruptly, narrowing his own eyes dangerously. "Father?"

"Is the rut finished?" he demanded curtly. Lucien's composure shook for a moment and fear flashed before the male narrowed his own eyes and shook his head in the positive.

"If it wasn't I would still be fighting you," retorted Lucien.

"Lying is classified as fighting, in my books." The sharp spike of anger reminded Daemon very much of Lucivar when he was younger but it was smoothed over quickly. He raised a brow at the green-gold eyed male. "So I was right."

"It is over," said Lucien firmly but there was a flicker of doubt in his voice. "But the longing is still there. Not so strong as the rut but it is still there."

Daemon couldn't think of what to say to that. He had been through nearly 1700 years of ruts and most of them had ended in the destruction of whichever court he happened to be serving in at the time. His longing for the myth that was Witch had been so focussed

that everything had been a threat. His son's longing was different. His was tapered to a living female that he knew was alive. He wasn't waiting for anything that didn't have a set time-line but perhaps... perhaps that time-line was what was causing such a strong reaction in his son. When he had been waiting for Witch there was no particular date set for her to arrive so there was no constant anxiety as he waited for that non-existent date. His son didn't have that luxury. From what Daemon had gleamed off his nephew, his son had found interest in a White Jeweled witch living in his daughter's new Realm. According to his namesake, the witch was the same age as Lucien's sister - even went to school in the same year as her and was an acquaintance - and it was causing a vicious internal battle in the male. He was 26 and the female he wanted was only 15...

"She turns 16 soon," Lucien snarled softly, desperately. Daemon's son knew how to read his father's moods and thoughts very well, just from one glance. "She comes to her majority at 17 in one world and 18 in the other."

"You've done research."

"I've talked to my sister."

Daemon nodded in acknowledgement. "That would do it." His lips quirked.

"Not one more word, father. As it is, mother already knows about my predicament. She has yet to find out why her flower bed in the medical wing mysteriously died." Daemon stiffened.

"You wouldn't."

"Oh I would."

"What would I have to do to gain your silence?"

"You will have to help me keep mother occupied whenever I... shall we say, disappear. She would very much disapprove of my escaping grandpapa's rules about...certain things."

A scowl of distaste later and Lucien received an agreement. With the smug look he wore, it was all Daemon could do not to cuff his son in the back of the head as though he was boy again.

Harry was annoyed.

No, he was beyond annoyed. He was nearing furious. The woman before him was insisting that they weren't going to actually practise the spells they were supposed to cover. He felt his control on the Jewel power slipping and so he dove into his magical core in search of the calm that came with his wizard's magic. It soothed him enough to form coherent thought and it effectively shielded his Sapphire strength from unleashing itself.

"I would imagine that Lord Voldemort wouldn't have a problem attacking children. Oh, and his Death Eaters of course, I don't think they'd mind either, oh and we can't forget that untapped market of paedophiles - they probably don't mind and of course there's always..."

"10 points from Gryffindor Mr Potter," Dolores Umbridge informed him with a grimly satisfied look she had adopted after a heavy wince at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. "Now let me make a few things perfectly clear. You have been told that a certain Dark wizard has returned from the dead -"

"Now why would I need someone to tell me that?" Harry pondered loudly, ignoring the fact that he had just rudely interrupted a teacher. "He never actually died so really, that blows the whole beginning of your argument out of the water right there, Professor." He smirked. "But yes, that is correct. Voldemort is indeed back. Rather rude of him too - I had been rather enjoying my year, even if I was forced to participate in that awful tournament."

"Mr-Potter-you-have-already-lost-your-house-10-points-do-not-make-this-worse-for-yourself," she hissed in one breath, studiously ignoring him. Harry raised a brow and smoothly intercepted her next words.

"You sound as if you don't believe me. Then would I be correct in assuming that you also believe that Cedric Diggory dropped dead of his own accord?"

"His death was a tragic accident."

"I would hardly call the Killing Curse 'accidental'." His lips curled into a soft sneer of disgust. "Unless the class text is also incorrect when it says that in order to cast the Killing Curse one must want to kill the victim."

"As Mr Diggory was not killed by the Killing Curse I fail to see how that relates to our discussion."

"As you weren't there I fail to see how you can manage to entertain such delusions of grandeur that you will not believe the truth when you hear it."

Her face contorted for a moment and Harry thought she was finally going to scream at him but his delight was squashed when her face turned perfectly blank. She took out a quill and wrote out something before looking up at him once more with fierce satisfaction in her toad-like eyes. "Come here, Mr Potter, dear."

"I would ask you refrain from addressing me so familiarly, Professor Umbridge. Those type of things are frowned upon." His voice adapted a velvety coolness as he approached the desk nonetheless.

"Take this to Professor McGonagall," she informed him and Harry was disgusted to see the effort it was taking for her to refrain from calling him 'dear'. She must have been sucking up for years in order to gain such a habit.

"Of course Professor," he purred, allowing his newly awakened knowledge of Parseltongue to twist through the words. It made them sound horribly dangerous and dark and he smirked wickedly at the shudder he could see run through her.

He left before she had the chance to speak with him anymore.

He did as he had been told to do and he went to Professor McGonagall. He did not unleash his temper - he wouldn't dare to such a thing in the presence of an elder female that he respected -

but answered her questions calmly and accepted her judgement on his behaviour.

Which was not to say he agreed with her - because he didn't - but he didn't want to argue with her. Professor McGonagall was very loyal to Albus Dumbledore and he knew that the Headmaster would not like to know that the Gryffindor Golden Boy was disobeying his Deputy Headmistress. If he hadn't been wary of Dumbledore before, he was now that he'd gone through Daemon's final training.

After leaving the Gryffindor Head of House's office, Harry made his way back up to the dorms. He called in his bag (he had left it in the class and he didn't mind causing more confusion when it randomly disappeared) and emptied it of its contents, returning them to the first compartment of his trunk. He brushed his hand over the sliver of Sapphire and activated the locking mechanism. He smiled when the lightning-bolt shaped clasp plunged down into the skull (the bottom of the lock) and it clicked - signifying his trunk was locked and safe from others. The lock had been a private little joke of Kirra's and he hadn't actually noticed it until he had gone about transferring all of his things into it.

He took notice of the time and sighed. He still had most of the afternoon left to do absolutely nothing (there was nothing anyone could say or do to get him to go back to that Umbridge woman's class today). He chanced a look outside and spotted a large golden-brown form whirling in wide lazy circles above the forest. The tingle of Blood prickled his senses and he reached out with a tentative spear thread to the spiralling form.

/ Rex? ./

/ Harry. / The golden eagle tipped its wing in his general direction but continued to fly languidly in the September sunshine that had emerged just after lunch. / I was delivering the Lady's messages. /

/ Did you have a good trip? ./ Harry pulled himself up to sit in the ledge and opened the window, causing a rain of water droplets to splatter down the side of the castle wall. He didn't have anything

better to do and it appeared that the Kindred Warlord was equally as bored as he was.

/ It was not bad/ Rex grudgingly replied. / But it was not fun. /

/ Leaps through the Darkness never are/ Harry replied in amusement, dropping his chin into his hands and smiling out the window in the raptor's general direction. / Aside from the obvious, did anything interesting happen? ./

He felt annoyance bleed through the link. / I ran into an owl delivering a letter to the school from the Ministry. / He watched the bird swoop down, talons extended, in mimicry of what he meant by 'ran into'. / It was lucky it was a female/ He replied finally.

Harry laughed and let it echo along the spear thread to his conversation buddy. / I feel the same way, my friend/ said Harry. / I am supposed to be in DADA right now, you know? ./

Rex screeched in amusement. / Then it is a good thing I returned so quickly. You can amuse us both by telling your story. /

And so Harry did. He told the eagle everything that had happened that day - for extra measures against their combined boredom - and the eagle shared his own thoughts on the various topics of discussion. Rex was particularly interested in if it was possible to actually turn the 'toad-human' (as he so fondly called Umbridge) into a toad. He said that it would be a rather unwelcome gift to send up to the owlery but that he was certain there were a few owls both stupid enough and hungry enough to eat a transfigured human. All hypothetically, of course.

Harry still snickered at the thought.

When the bell rang throughout the castle Harry sighed in disappointment. Rex had long since given up his idle soaring and had perched on a battlement some 50 feet below Harry. The eagle made a tittering noise that carried along their communication thread to convey his annoyance at his only male human friend having to go.

/ We'll talk later? ./ Harry asked, standing and preparing to close the window.

/ Come to the owlery tonight and we can talk. If you'd like I can even translate for Hedwig and she can join us. I know that she would love to communicate with 'her Harry'. / Harry blushed faintly and chuckled at the sly tone Rex was using. / Hedwig adores you Harry. She would be very pleased to have the company. /

/ I'll see if I can sneak away/ Harry relayed as he waved quickly and shut the windows. / See you tomorrow in any case. /

/ Tomorrow/ The golden bird echoed cordially before Harry watched the massive take flight and launch himself upwards in great wide arcs until he was nothing more than a spot in the sky.

Blaise Zabini was a male in fifth year Slytherin. He was decently popular amongst his house but his standing as a neutral family was one that made those devote followers of the Dark Lord bristle and snap. He could take it all in stride, though, and he would continue to do so. His family had been neutral as far back as they could trace and, no matter who his mother was married to at any particular time, they would remain neutral.

Blaise was first and foremost a Zabini, then he was a Slytherin, and then - if company allowed - he was Blaise. He had acquaintances and casual friends in Ravenclaw and even a few in Hufflepuff. He had tried to be friendly with the Gryffindors (the less prejudice and unintelligent ones, at least) but they seemed set in their ways. Unless, of course, one counted a certain Ginevra (Ginny, if you wanted to live to see another day) Weasley, which he did.

He had met the female Weasley in his third year, not three months after the end of her first year and that incident with the Chamber of Secrets. He had been startled to find his secluded corner of the library (one near the history section that few dared to enter - Hermione Granger excepted, and even she did not approach when she spotted Blaise) occupied by a frustrated red-haired female who had been hunched over a thick potions text and scowling at it.

Blaise had demanded why she was there and she had merely looked at him and responded that she was trying to make her textbook spontaneously combust and wanted to be sure she didn't miss it on the off chance that Snape was a mind-reader. Blaise had surprised himself by laughing and the girl had smiled wanly before gently closing her book and propping her chin up on her hands and regarding him in perplexed amusement.

Flashback

"What are you doing in the history section?" Ginny asked, raising an eyebrow curiously. "It isn't exactly the most visited area of the library." She gestured dryly to the dust-covered tomes.

"Oh dear, looks like I've gone and ruined your plans then, have I?" s

Deciding it was best not to test the famous Weasley temper, he answered her, "Third year transfiguration essay."

"Really?" She leaned forward to peer at the title of the essay and the topic curiously. "Looks fairly simple."

"It is a fair year above your head." he stated simply, raising one sculptured brow and glancing over his textbook at her. She had narrowed her eyes indignantly and even slightly hurt. "It is interesting that you say it seems simple."

"Well," she began slowly and Blaise could tell that the topic had just brushed a still sensitive topic, at least for her, "I'm ahead of my year. It must come from having six older brothers." It was a poor excuse but the Zabini heir knew better than to press a female into a corner - unlike some of his house mates.

He nodded instead and reached into his bag, withdrawing his arithmancy text and sliding it across the table to her. She looked between him and the book questioningly, suspiciously. He offered a reassuring look but she seemed unconvinced to accept anything without a spoken confirmation. He smirked inwardly at the Slytherin self-preservation she displayed.

"Arithmancy only starts in third year so you know as much about it as I do - that is to say, none. If you're interested in reading something other than simple second year potions, you could read my book."

End Flashback

Blaise pulled himself from his musings and greeted the familiar school owl (he thought its name was Henry) and accepted the note it bore. Henry (he was almost certain it was now that he had caught sight of the feminine writing on the slip of parchment) clicked his beak impatiently and the Slytherin rolled his eyes, tossing it a piece of bacon from his plate. This placated the bird but did not stop it from smacking the boy's head before taking flight once more. Blaise smirked and dusted the fallen downy feathers off his head before reading the short note in his hand.

I swear, if you don't hand over your potions textbook next I see you, I'm hexing you three weeks from Tuesday.

-G.W.

His smirk turned into a wry smile as he chuckled at the blunt tone. Trust the female to attempt and write a polite note before she'd had her morning coffee. He surreptitiously tucked the message away and scanned the hall idly before he met the gaze of the one he was searching for. He smirked and tilted his head. She narrowed her eyes and twirled her wand in mock-absence.

His smirk widened and his eyes glinted in the stormy light of the ceiling above. The funniest part about her note was that she had probably written it in her last class and sent it off so that he would get it at dinner. That meant that she had been perfectly awake and that the note was so blunt and annoyed because she had just finished her History of Magic class. He acknowledged the implied-threat and patted the bag beside him on the bench in assurance. Her eyes were no longer narrowed but she was still annoyed, he could tell.

He finished supper at a regular pace and began to leave when others did. AS he was exiting the hall he brushed against the smaller red-head and bent to whisper in her ear.

"So I'll be seeing you three weeks from Tuesday then?" he asked, holding the book just out of her reach. She scowled at him and he chuckled before letting her take it. She sniffed indignantly and made his smirk widen. "Night Gin."

"Whatever Zabini." The lack of bite assured him that all teasing was forgiven and he gave her a rare half-smile before straightening and heading off towards his dorms in the dungeons. She stuck out her tongue childishly at his turned back and he turned at the last second to catch her expression. A blush rose to her cheeks before she scowled again.

He waved merrily and ducked down the stairs before the stinging hex she'd flung had a chance to strike him.

TBC...

Chapter#12

Ginny's eyes darted across the page, absorbing the information rapidly. Although, reabsorbing was a much better word to describe it. She had hoped - foolishly - that perhaps her advanced learning was a simple result of having older brothers and that as she entered her fourth year that she would fall back into the pattern of learning the rest of her peers were at. Naturally, she was wrong. Not a week into the term and already she was borrowing Blaise's books.

She felt the whisper of Tom Riddle in the back of her mind and glowered at the wall in an attempt at ignoring it. Ever since Harry had returned from the graveyard and declared that Voldemort was alive once more it seemed as though the fragment of Tom Riddle that had remained in her mind had grown stronger. Strangely, almost unnerving, the fragment did not approve of what its present reincarnation was doing with itself. On top of that it had the strange habit of talking to her.

"It really isn't all that strange is it?" She tried to ignore him, she really did. "It's not as though I have anyone else to talk to."

"Would you just shut up?" she snapped back, focussing her thoughts into the walled-off section of her mind where he dwelled.

She felt him grin smugly. "And here I thought you were ignoring me."

"Not for lack of trying," she grumbled, staring blankly at the page before her.

"I'd noticed." He paused before he continued, a tad bit hesitant, "What are you reading?"

"A fifth year potions text," she replied finally. "And it's your fault too."

"My fault? How is it my fault?"

"You sit in there and leak old knowledge into my head and then I feel like I'm just sitting through a year's worth of review classes." Her

mental voice was matter-of-fact even as she wished she was able to strangle the bodiless voice.

"Well who's fault is it that they kept writing in an obviously Dark diary?" he responded indignantly. "And don't give me that whole 'Malfoy snuck it into my things' line again because that is getting ridiculously old, ridiculously fast."

"Who wrote that diary in the first place?" He was silent but she felt the annoyance and smirked at it. "That's what I thought."

He sent a mental middle finger at her and withdrew with a grumble and a childish sulky air around him. She raised a brow and returned to her book.

This reading and talking was the result of nerves. She had been suffering from nightmares of her first year again and she knew it was the result of the constant denial of danger - of Voldemort. She was reminded of her own denial that there was anything wrong and the nightmares were the result of that reminder. In class she would drift off and be shocked into attention at the faint echo of dripping water and echoing footsteps deep in the tunnels of the Chamber.

Tom - to at least try and be civil with the bit of memory in her mind - had been practising subtle Occlumency to help her be rid of the nightmares. Her rejection of him had erected the barrier between his memory and her mind but it was still possible for him to help her whenever she was not in complete control of her mind. He could choose to harm her as well but her magic (a thing she was growing increasingly aware of in recent times) did not respond well to ill-intent and would lock him in his place and refuse to release him until she consciously communicated with her core and made it let go. He had only tried that once and only to get her attention when she had been ignoring his warning to leave a particularly nasty cursed object in the Black house alone.

She looked across the common room to where her brother, Hermione and Harry were all seated. The elder two couldn't see Harry but for his front so they couldn't see the tenseness in his back the betrayed

his annoyance. They were probably pestering him with questions again and he probably didn't want to talk about it. Ginny wanted to help him but she knew she couldn't. She also wanted to point out Sirius's head that kept popping up in the fireplace but, strictly speaking, there were still a few of the upper years hanging around and she wasn't an idiot.

"No, but the murderer is," Tom piped up blandly.

"Not a murderer," Ginny muttered out loud, too tired to try and direct her thoughts to an internal conversation.

"Not the point," he returned easily. "The point is that he's already startled a first year - at least, I think it was a first year - and, if the information you've been told is to be believed, then he shouldn't be using the Floo Network."

"Funny how I never asked your opinion."

"No, but I gave it to you anyway. If I'm to be stuck in your mind then I'll thank you to listen every once in awhile - bearing in mind that I am technically older than you."

The Weasley female rolled her eyes and began to gather her things. She wasn't going to get anything productive done that night and if she left the room than others might be encouraged to do the same and Sirius would be able to speak with his godson. She turned inwards to speak but made sure that half of her attention was focussed on the room at large. "You are also a part of a memory from a diary. The only education you have is up until sixth year."

"You'd be surprised what I knew in my sixth year. That was back when they actually taught you things - not like this tickle-charm and stinging hex shit they teach today."

Ginny agreed but didn't say a word. She wasn't about to give Tom pleasure in anything as long as he was living inside her body. Neville tugged on his best friend's sleeve insistently, pulling her along behind him in the direction of the Forbidden Forest. The ever-constant tingle of his Affinity hummed in delight at the wild magic that

filled and thrived in the ancient wood and it was creating a building pressure in his head. The girl being dragged along rolled her eyes and frowned faintly before she shook her head as though to clear it.

"Neville, I understand that your Affinity is going haywire with your upcoming magical maturity but honestly...do the words 'Forbidden Forest' and 'Hogwarts High Inquisitor' mean anything to you?"

The older boy stopped and released his friend, shifting anxiously and looking between the castle and the tree-line nervously. He wrung his hands together and jumped when a spark of green jolted between his palms and rained to the ground. "But Gin..." he whined, face pale and sweaty with the effort it was taking to remain calm, "It's hurting!"

"It's not hurting, Neville," Ginny Weasley tried to explain patiently, but her voice rose slightly in annoyance. "It has survived wars before and it will survive them again... we're probably too far away for you to do anything anyhow."

The Gryffindor looked doubtfully at the dark forest and Ginny sighed, muttering to something only she could see before she continued, "Just leave it Neville. Focus on the greenhouses...remember them? Remember the taint Umbridge brought near the seedlings? They are hurting Neville, they need your help."

Slowly, Neville felt the pressure recede and his Affinity reached out towards the Hogwarts greenhouses, wanting to help the seedlings planted within but unable to with the physical body so far away. With his Affinity placated for the time being, Neville sighed in relief and smiled thankfully at the impatient red-head. She was tapping her foot and had one hand planted on her hip, eyeing him warily, as though she wanted nothing more than a reason to hex him beyond him dragging her out in the cold October weather to the forest that, strictly speaking, they weren't allowed to go into.

"Sorry Gin, but it just..." he trailed off helplessly and looked at her, hoping she could understand why he had needed to come out.

The forest was ancient and held so much more life than anyone else but he was privy to. He could, on rare occasions, when his Affinity got

to be too much for him to hold back, sense the forest and feel it in his veins, going beyond Hogwarts wards and grounds. He loved the old forest and he could just barely resist running off into it by focussing his Affinity on caring for the greenhouses. Professor Sprout had been told of his Affinity in confidence and she was always trying to find reasons to buy near-dead plants from shady little stores so that he would have something to do with his gift. Those dying plants kept him grounded at the school and normally were enough to hold him.

But this week, with the added pressure of a Hogwarts High Inquisitor breathing down the staff's necks, Professor Sprout had been unable to procure more than some seedlings from her own garden at home for him to focus on. The new life didn't call so much as dying life and even the greater quantity couldn't make up the difference. His Affinity had turned its attention to the calling forest and the urge to help the forest (an impossible feat and one that would be mended naturally and without his help) had nearly overwhelmed him several times over the course of the week. Today had been the last straw and the call had been at its loudest.

"So, have you heard?" Ginny asked, as they began the walk back up to the castle.

"Have I heard what?" Neville asked, blinking himself out of his Affinity induced stupor.

"About Harry teaching a DADA club," she replied promptly, eyes glinting with excitement. "My brother really doesn't know how to keep a secret."

"I'd heard a little something, yeah," Neville murmured, remembering the significant looks Harry had been on the receiving end of last night in the dorm. Ron kept finding excuses to talk about 'decisions' and eventually Harry had gotten so annoyed (not that very many people could tell - Neville only could because his Affinity also granted him minor empathic abilities) that he had announced that he would be at the owlery visiting Hedwig and Rex (though Neville wasn't sure who Rex was).

"He doesn't seem too happy about it." Ginny bit her lip nervously and Neville focussed on his best friend's nervous gesture. "Have you noticed his eyes when he gets upset?"

The Longbottom heir's mind flashed to the Avada Kedavra green - a deadly and terrifying shade - that the younger male's eyes turned the other night and to the darkness lingering in the back of his eyes and unwillingly trembled. "I'd say when he feels emotions, period."

Ginny nodded, and he could see the worry flickering to life. "I agree. So you have noticed?" When he gave his affirmation, she continued, "I'm worried for him. He looks like he's done more than just seen death."

Neville smiled thinly, mind already whirring with possibilities but he held his tongue for his friend's sake. He wasn't naive - the condition of his parents and his Affinity meant that he had already seen death (and caused it - though that was a story for a different time) and his view of the world wasn't all rainbows and unicorns like much of the wizarding world. Ginny wasn't innocent by any stretch, after her run-in and possession in her first year - not to mention the younger version of Tom Riddle living in her head and sharing her body. But, all the same, Neville didn't want her to fall even further into that particular pit of darkness than she already had.

"I wouldn't worry about it. This is Harry Potter we're talking about. He's faced V-voldemort," Ginny did not flinch (she didn't have much reason to now that she, essentially, had a part of him living inside of her) but Neville still stumbled over the name and flinched as he said it, "and survived."

"You're right, of course," she agreed, nodding but still frowning, "but that doesn't stop be from worrying..."

Albus Dumbledore scowled at the letter - although note would have been a better term - that lay on his desk.

Albus,

Good luck with your weapon. I'm not getting in that one's way.

-Frere

It wasn't completely obvious but, then again, it was. 'Frere'...what kind of closing was that? Surely his older brother knew that 'frere' was just slightly obvious that it was his brother - anyone who knew basic french would know that.

What was worse was what that note was answering. He had written his brother - a rather loose and slightly unofficial member of the Order - and asked if he could possibly pass along information about the children from his school who tried to get anything or do anything illegal. That was his first request and it was the only thing Aberforth would agree to help him with (the Dumbledore Patriarch - ever since their father had died - refused to do anything in anyway that would help his little brother). His second request had been that his brother watch if Harry Potter were to engage in anything illegal and, if he did, to stop him and hold him until Albus arrived to take him back to school and discipline him.

It had become apparent that whatever it was that was making the various detection objects that monitored the boy's magical movements go haywire was going to remain a secret only Harry knew.

Which was not to say he wasn't trying - because he was. Albus had gone to the depths of his Red Jewel and tried to breach the first layer of walls in the young Gryffindor's mind but had been expelled forcefully to come to full awareness and finding his Red Jewels drained. He had been operating using only Opal strength - the same strength of one of his loyal Order members (Sirius, if truth be told).

So Albus was understandably upset that his own sibling was refusing to help him keep tabs on the young Potter. He was also refusing to use any of his contacts among the goblins to find out why the special vault he had for Order expenses was no longer receiving the monthly monetary deposits from the Potter Family vault. Those deposits had made up the majority of the income and with them frozen... the Order was no longer able to purchase any of the rare detection devices that littered his office and helped him with his efforts in the war. The bribes that Mundungus required to gain information from his various 'business' partners were considerably less and as a result their new

information was few and far between as well as getting less and less true.

He had realized that his brother wouldn't help and so now then he turned to Kirra - the young Queen who was acting as Harry's Queen while they were on Earth and not in Kaeleer (where he only indirectly served the blonde female - Albus thought that a 'Legacy' had been mentioned...). He was currently awaiting either her response to his request or for her arrival at his office.

He felt the wards around his office shift and a majestic gold-brown eagle appeared out of nowhere and landed on one of the more sturdy golden instruments in the office. The Kindred Warlord surveyed its surroundings for a moment before its piercing crimson stare landed on Albus himself. He - Albus could make out the maleness in its psychic scent - ruffled his feathers in haughty annoyance before making a short screeching sound and calling in a small piece of parchment with gentle curving words in bright blue ink.

Albus held out his hand and accepted the bit of paper. As he read the short note he felt his temper rising once more. Fawkes, on his perch in the corner, trilled in amusement but it brought no comfort to the Headmaster.

Albus,

Or should I call you Headmaster? Either way, my answer is no. I will admit that I am the reason you are unable to breach his mind and the reason you keep draining your Jewels trying to do so. As for Aberforth... well, let's just say that the Dumbledore Patriarch has my respect and appreciation. Do send my regards along when you get the chance.

-Kirra S.D.

So the girl was against him as well...then again, what did he expect? For the female whose mother was the most powerful Witch to walk the realms and whose father was the most powerful male in all of the Blood's history to just drop her own power and take a place serving

him? It was as unlikely as Voldemort helping a child after a bad dream.

Harry studiously ignored his two 'best-friends' - both of whom were too damn curious for their own good. He had suffered through those detentions with Umbridge for about a week before Kirra had cornered him and demanded why he smelt of blood. He didn't question why she could smell his blood and told her about the Blood Quill and his detentions. She had stared at him in utter disbelief before smacking him upside the head and launching into a lecture about the proper behaviour of Warlord Princes...

She suggested he kill the woman.

He still chuckled at the expression of confusion - like one of the wolf pups that shared Mrs. Beale's kitchen (she was their self-appointed 'mama') - she had worn when he said he couldn't. She had then gone on to suggest that he find someone who could and had promptly volunteered.

But that wasn't the source of his friend's annoyance with him at the moment. Although it had annoyed them that it had been Kirra and not they that had found several laws that prohibited the use of Blood Quills on minors, in school and simply in general. Umbridge had not been happy and it had been the result of that encounter that spurred her to giving him even more detention and with Filch doing the most menial and time consuming tasks.

/ They certainly seem upset/ Rex commented lightly. Harry could swear that the eagle was smirking at him. / Would that have anything to do with this second letter Hedwig has brought you from Gringotts? ./

/ It might, yeah/ Harry snarled at his fellow blood-male. The Tiger Eye Warlord let out a screech of laughter and quickly translated for Hedwig's benefit. She gave him a reproachful look and then snubbed him by presenting her back. Rex ruffled his feathers in amusement at the glare he received from Harry.

/ You need to go. She wanted work. I fail to see the issue that those two have/ Rex commented, turning his piercing stare on the two Thirds of the Trio (Harry was the part that made them 'Golden').

/ The issue is Gringotts puts wards on their letters to me ever since I sent Hedwig back with a request for the days that are available for me to meet with them. No one but she can deliver them and no one but me can read them. Goblin magic really is wonderful... / The last was more an absent musing than anything else. Beside him, Ginny was attempting to hold back snickers at the expressions of utter disbelief and self-righteous indignation her brother and Hermione were wearing. He smirked at the red-head and nudged her with his elbow, raising a brow. She glared and playfully shoved back, motioning to the letter in his hands.

"What's it say?" she asked curiously. Neville had explained hesitantly that he wanted to help Professor Sprout in the greenhouses before curfew and had charged Harry with the duty of 'watching out' for Ginny. Or, rather, watching out for those who got into Ginny's way.

Harry smiled secretively. "And why should I tell you?" he asked imperiously.

She batted her eyelashes in a sickeningly sweet way. "Because I'm just so beautiful?"

He chuckled. "I concede." She beamed and then snorted in laughter. "All right, it says...

Mr. Potter,

In response to your inquiry of available times, Gringotts has seen fit to inform you that your account manager is available on the weekend of your next Hogsmeade visit. We have been informed that you are capable of getting here on your own - although, we at Gringotts are in no way encouraging you to break school rules (Harry didn't believe that for a second and neither did Ginny as she snorted in disbelief the moment he spoke).

All your questions will be answered at your appointment. Please be prompt.

Gringotts

Manager Knotjaw

Magical Rights and Inheritance

... and that's it," Harry finished. He had been sure to keep his voice down so that only Ginny could hear him and, as a result, was getting dirty looks from his two best friends.

"So how are you planning on getting to Diagon Alley?" she questioned quietly.

He grinned faintly. "Oh, it shouldn't be too hard."

"Look," Hermione intervened between their unpredictable red-haired friend and the rude Hufflepuff boy quickly, "that's really not what this meeting was supposed to be about; it's supposed to be about - Harry?"

"About Harry?" someone demanded but then followed the bushy-haired girl's line of sight to the Boy-Who-Lived.

They had gathered at the Hog's Head - a shady sort of bar that wasn't actually very shady - to discuss Hermione's idea of a DADA group. Hermione's idea because Ron refused to have anything to do with it on the off chance that Harry would explode again (or else display another stunning act of calm, chilling anger); Hermione's idea because Harry didn't want to drag anyone else into a war that was rightfully his (he had been the one to bring Tommy back, after all).

Harry snapped his attention back to the conversation. He had been watching a very familiar blonde smiling at him from beneath her hood on the opposite side of the bar. She looked away when he had to return to his current group and he found himself upset. Especially considering who had accompanied said blonde to the bar.

"Hm? You-Know-Who? I'm afraid I don't know who. Be more specific."

The group just stared at him. Ginny looked to be holding back snickers and Neville was shooting her annoyed/amused looks from the other end of the crowd. Harry smirked at her and she scowled in return. With a brief raised brow in her direction he turned to address the hopefully-future DADA group. "Oh, you mean that You-Know-Who...and here I thought we were talking about my mystery lover." Several eager looks crossed across the faces before him - as well as some angry or disappointed ones - but the confusion outweighed it all. Several of the youngest Weasley's snickers escaped her lips and he smirked in general. "Of course, you mean our favourite Dark Lord Voldemort." He delighted in the screams and yelps of terror but felt his anger stirring beneath the stranglehold he had been trying to keep on his temper. "Yes, yes, he's back. Dumbledore did tell you all that last year - no point repeating it, if that's all you came here for."

"All Dumbledore told us last year was that Cedric Diggory got killed by You-Know-Who and that you brought his body back to the school. He didn't give us details, like how exactly Diggory got murdered, I think we'd all like to know -"

"If you've come to hear exactly what it looks like when Voldemort murders someone then I can't help you," Harry interrupted. His voice was a dark and deadly tone that whispered of pain and violence just barely restrained. His Avada Kedavra eyes locked with Zacharias Smith's aggressive face and too-eager-too-curious eyes. "Suffice to say, had it been you, you would have died. I don't want to talk about Cedric Diggory and I don't particularly care what you think it is you deserve to know. The fact of the matter is: you don't deserve to even be here if you can't say a bloody name without screaming."

The group was silent and Harry glared at them each in turn (minus Neville who had tried very hard not to wince and Ginny who had only flinched out of instinct and had scowled immediately after for her fault) paying special attention to Hermione. The whole idea had been hers and it seemed he was only here to be paraded in front of them like a freak. Then, when he was questioned about a painful topic that had become a wild story and had refused, they all doubted him for it.

"If you still want to join then speak with Hermione - this was her idea in the first place - and she can arrange all the details. I might remember to show up, if you're lucky, after that pretentious prying into my private affaires." The blonde in the cloak got up from her seat and approached their collection of tables. "If you'll excuse me.."

He rose and held out his hands for the approaching figure to take. There was a firm pressure from the delicate hands that pressed against his and glinting sapphire eyes stared him down, knowing and understanding his pain on depths he wasn't even aware of. The smaller companion tipped her head in her own greeting and he returned it with a small bow. "My Ladies."

She spoke with soft affection, "Prince." She swept her gaze over the crowd, assessing their worth and apparently deeming them unimportant. "It's time to go so if you're finished here..."

"I am." He nodded cordially.

A soft smile rose to the female's lips. "Then let's be on our way."

"Where are you going Harry?" Hermione's voice was curt and demanding and his anger simmered as he smiled slightly ferally at her.

"I have a prior engagement with Lady SaDiablo," he indicated shortly. "Aside from that it really is none of your business. Good day." He left the dingy bar with a wolf on one side of him and Jaenelle SaDiablo on the other.

Once outside he felt a sparkling of different jewels wrap around him and pull him through the Darkness to a destination he could only assume that Witch was capable of getting to without problem.

There was only a minor tingle of wizard magic and then a sudden sharp pain through his head before he found himself in an empty room lined with marble. The Ladies beside him snickered as he stumbled forward a step before reorienting himself and shooting them a less-than-amused look.

"That was unnecessarily cruel - jumping through Diagon Alley and Gringotts' wards like that," informed Harry. He could feel his mental barriers rebuilding the cracks that had formed at the sudden intrusion of wizard magic after leaving the neutrality of the Darkness. It was an uncomfortable tingling sensation that was accompanied by a throb of pain every now and then when he moved too quickly.

"Cruel but oh so amusing," Jaenelle quipped cheekily. "But then, what did you expect when Kirra warned you about travelling with her mother?"

He simply shrugged in response and then knelt down for Legacy's enthusiastic greeting.

/ Harry! You are not sick! ./

Harry raised an eyebrow at her choice of greeting. 'Not sick'? How very telling about her opinion of him. "No, I'm not sick. Thank you for the vote of confidence."

Legacy growled faintly and nipped his fingers when he went to scratch behind her ears. / No snarls. Is truth: Prince Harry gets sick much more than other Princes. /

"She has a point, Prince," Jaenelle murmured, struggling not to laugh at the matter-of-fact delivery the Kindred Healer had used to speak. "You do seem to end up injured far more than any of her other patients."

"That's because no one else but me dares to get hurt again after she's seen to them once and given them a lecture," he murmured in reply, smiling at the lady Witch.

/ I heard that. /

TBC...

Chapter#13

Knotjaw was, to put it simply, an disliked goblin. He hardly interacted with Gringotts customers and when he did he often lost them money. Unfortunately for them, he was also the head of the Magical Rights and Inheritance department and was in charge of many of their oldest accounts.

Currently, he was settled at his desk glaring at the older male seated across from him. As a personal rule, he despised humans - magical ones, especially - and this male was no exception to the rule. In fact, he probably hated his man even more than most because he was Blood and the Blood had betrayed the realm called Earth and had deprived them of their heritage by taking the very Witch who kept their realm alive. But that was an old story and one for another time.

"I hate you," Knotjaw announced finally, breaking the silence in the office.

"I hadn't noticed," was the dry reply he got.

Knotjaw snorted in disbelief and continued to glare. It was harder to hate the man who returned Witch to the realm but that didn't mean that Knotjaw couldn't try. Thankfully for his reputation, it was far easier than it sounded. Technically, the Witch he returned to the realm wasn't the Witch that was sustaining it.

A knock sounded on the heavy double doors and the Manager of the Potter Accounts waved at the bulkier guard goblins to open the doors. They did and the blonde woman who had accompanied the man before him entered with her lupine companion and another, scrawnier, male with shaded green eyes hidden behind light glasses. Knotjaw would have spoken but he felt the twine of power seeping from the boy and tasting the magic that lived in and supported Gringotts. He felt a shiver run up his spine in response to a strange twining magic brushing against his magical core before retreating with a faint feeling of approval. It was almost as bad as when a certain blonde-haired teen visited...

"Mr Potter," he greeted. The shadowy emerald orbs snapped from eyeing the guard goblins to his account manager. Suspicion was clear and very slowly the teen left the relative safety he was in being beside the lady Witch to standing before the desk, just a little behind and to the side of the older male sitting down.

"Prince Harry." The Guardian smiled thinly. The boy - Harry - glanced over sharply, startled at the sudden voice coming from someone he had only just noticed.

"Grandpapa Saetan," murmured Harry, expression relaxing rapidly. He wrapped his arms around the elderly man affectionately, smiling up at the taller male with a childlike sincerity. "I missed you."

"Grandpapa Saetan," murmured Harry as he felt the tension leave his body at the sight of the man he had come to see as a grandfather. He wouldn't dare call Saetan by his Protocol name as the man wanted to live a normal life (as normal as he could get one in any case) but he couldn't find the courage to simply call him grandpapa as Kirra did. He approached hesitantly wanting very much for the friendly hug he used to receive and smiling when the elder accepted it easily and returned the embrace. "I missed you."

And indeed he had, missed him, that is. Saetan had been a steady constant during the time when his entire outlook on life was being pulled and twisted and outright shattered. Saetan had never asked him to do anything he wasn't comfortable with. Saetan had never wanted him to be anything but Harry - to be the child he never was; he hadn't wanted him to practice his Craft or his magic, he hadn't wanted him to study the political texts or the financial notes. He would have liked it and appreciated if Harry did those things with him but he didn't demand it or even ask it politely of Harry. In return for this steadiness and unassuming mood towards the young wizard, Harry had done his best to please Saetan and to prove that he really did want to learn what the Guardian had to teach him.

"Hm." Saetan hummed pleasantly, the deepness lowered voice seeping from his chest and rumbling through Harry's body. "How have you been? Any problems...?"

He felt the same void creeping up into his veins and he shuddered briefly before he locked gazes with the elder male. Gold clashed with green for a moment before Harry nodded reassuringly. "I'm fine, High Lord," he mumbled before he sat down in the only available chair left - now that Jaenelle had sat down.

"Mr Potter." The goblin he knew was his account manager repeated his name. Harry turned in his seat and gave the best bow he was capable of. Court rules and protocol pounded in his head and he paid them careful attention.

"You must be Knotja," he acknowledged, recognizing the desk and the nameplate that Hedwig had shown him in his mind. "I am grateful you took the time to meet with me - and on such a ...restricted...schedule." The goblin snorted in dark amusement and Harry smirked faintly.

"Indeed," Knotjaw muttered, baring his pointed teeth in a wicked look. "You've never spoken to me regarding your account so just listen and I'll do all the talking." He cast a shrewd look at the young wizard as he gathered up a stack of parchment.

Harry raised a brow but nodded. Knotjaw continued as though he hadn't needed Harry's approval nor did he need to even consult him regarding the accounts in the first place.

"To put it so that your simple brain can comprehend it, you have two accounts. One is the vault you've always visited: the Potter Trust Vault. It is for whatever expenses you may come across regarding your schooling and for a few years after your schooling; it contains 10,000 galleons and 500 additional galleons worth in change. The second is the Potter Family Vault." Knotjaw shuffled some papers and then glared at nothing in particular as he continued, "The Potter Family Vault holds family heirlooms and approximately 200,000,000 galleons. If you include that with your liquid assets you come to a total of..." he peered over a few sheets before finishing, "nearly 1,000,000,000 galleons and change...and growing every day. Not including a few of the remaining properties of the Potter family." The total made the goblin seem impossibly smug.

Harry gaped in astonishment. He had known that he was well off but honestly...that was seriously pushing the limits of his expectations. Forget pushing limits; it blew them sky-high! Beside him he felt Saetan stir as he finished the calculations in his mind and realized quite how many gold marks that was equivalent to. Jaenelle's eyes gleamed in delight at the thought of the shopping she could take him on with that amount in his pocket.

Knotjaw continued as though he hadn't noticed their reactions, "As you are the last living Potter, Gringotts has taken the liberty of invoking the Young Lord Heir Act. This gives you all rights and responsibilities of the Potter Patriarch as there are no other Lords or Heirs to the Potter family. This includes control of and access to all of your accounts as well as a seat on the Board of Governors for Hogwarts, a seat in the Wizengamot, as well as a position as partner in several large corporations and companies. You will not be allowed to preform magic outside of school, however, but you will be allowed to preform enough magic that you can Apparate - once you take your test prematurely, of course."

"Could the test be arranged discretely? As well as tutoring in the subject?" Jaenelle leaned forwards eagerly. Saetan sighed to Harry's side and the younger Warlord Prince smirked. He certainly didn't mind Jaenelle getting excited over his life - it wasn't as though she was getting final say in anything. That was what Kirra was for. Kirra and Legacy would be the only ones - if anyone at all - to help him manage his 'new' life (by new he meant this whole new legal thing he was about to discuss).

Knotjaw regarded the blonde woman with disguised contempt. He was trying very hard to be polite, that much was clear, and Harry could say that he was rather impressed that Jaenelle could command such attention even in a realm that wasn't hers. As Knotjaw and Jaenelle (aided by her father) began to discuss the legal technicalities, that went way over his range of knowledge, he leaned back in his seat and absently scratched behind Legacy's ear. The Healer made soft noises of pleasure and he basked in the Opal strength of the wolf.

/ KaeAskavi waits for you in the Dark Forest/ she mumbled sleepily as she yawned and flashed an impressive set of fangs, startling

Knotjaw momentarily. / He wishes to stay for a time to be sure that this learning place is safe enough for the lady. Shadow insists. / Harry smirked faintly at the mention of the Kindred wolf. / Will he be allowed to stay? ./

/ I don't think it anyone would be able to stop him if he chose to stay and Kirra wanted him to/ Harry replied in amusement along a psychic thread.

/ That is what I told him/ Legacy grumbled. / He did not believe me. /

She didn't understand and if there was something Hermione Granger hated, it was not understanding. She had always understood everything around her, ever since she was little. She had vivid memories of throwing tantrums in primary school over her teachers' lack of instructions (an incident involving a subject for painting that didn't involve fingers sprang to mind). Her thirst for knowledge and understanding hadn't left her when she found out she was a witch. If anything, it only increased at the prospect of a whole other culture and a society that had been hidden away and separate for so many centuries. She had immediately immersed herself in anything she could get her hands on regarding the wizarding world.

And it was a fascinating subject - the wizarding world. Magic being what it was - mysterious and scientifically impossible - Hermione simply couldn't leave it be. At first, before she had met Ron and Harry on friendly terms (snide comments behind her back and knowing who they were didn't exactly count as 'friendly terms'), she had planned on returning to the muggle world and getting a proper education. After the incident with the troll, she had reevaluated her plans for the future - for purely childish reasons really - and had decided that, perhaps, a future in the magical world with one of the thousands of new career opportunities wasn't so bad.

But that wasn't what she lacked understanding in at the moment. At the moment, she lacked understanding at one of her best friend's behaviour as of late. Harry was being impossible and was refusing to see perfectly logical reason! Not only had he quite nearly ruined all of her careful planning and preparation by being so blunt and rude to the few students who had been interested but he had also

spontaneously left with some unknown woman! She could be a Death Eater and that wolf could be an illegal animagus! He really had no thought for his safety without her guidance. She had thought - had hoped - that perhaps the happenings of their fourth year had taught him something of responsibility and of keeping himself safe (Voldemort was back, after all!). Hermione had suggested this DADA club so that he could recognize the need for leadership and responsibility and to awaken those innate talents in himself.

Of course, per Murphy's Law, he had to get abducted by...Kirra...and taken away to some completely dangerous realm where a slip of the tongue or lack of proper court training could get him killed. A realm where he wasn't even able to speak through someone more politically savvy - like Professor Dumbledore. The only person who went with him was Kirra and Hermione knew her manners quite well!

"Ms Granger." The bushy-haired Gryffindor found herself quite suddenly directly in front of a familiar acquaintance. Lucien smiled at her and there was a strange feral intensity she was unused to seeing directed at herself glinting in the green-gold eyes. "What a pleasant coincidence."

Hermione felt Ron stiffen beside her and she hurried to speak before the boy could throw a fit. "Mr S.D.," She responded stiffly, but was interrupted by the male.

"Lucien," he corrected, his posture stiffening slightly, but hidden very well, at the formal greeting. "Mr S.D. makes me feel too old for my liking."

"Lucien," she repeated, but she frowned faintly at the familiarity he was insisting upon - especially considering he was her elder. "What brings you to Hogsmeade?"

"Is that what this quaint little place is called?" he asked curiously, glancing up and down the street appraisingly. "Fascinating. To answer your question, I was escorting a message to my sister and have just returned from delivering it. I am hoping that it pleases her; I hardly get to see her anymore."

Hermione thought to Kirra. The Ravenclaw had become good friends with Luna - sharing long conversations that made Hermione want to rip out her hair from its roots - but she hardly associated with the Gryffindor house. She spoke sometimes with the Slytherins in her classes (Hermione had seen her continuing the conversations in the hallways - always seemingly content) and chatted amicably with the Hufflepuffs but she didn't seem to like the Gryffindors. There were a few she talked to, certainly, Ginny, Harry, Neville, sometimes Fred and George...but she didn't speak with anyone else. It went against the things that had been in a Queen's nature, according to the sole book she owned on the Blood. As she didn't know Kirra very well, she didn't know how to respond to Lucien's offhand comment and so chose to remain silent.

He smirked (infuriatingly attractive that it was) at her. "Have you had any troubles with your moontime?" She blushed furiously in embarrassment and fought the urge to gape at him. "I have a recipe for a brew I managed to get out of my cousin, Surreal, that you might like...if you want?" It was a question but Hermione didn't think she was going to escape him without accepting and she didn't want to prolong this particular topic for much longer. Ron was starting to catch on.

"Certainly." She nodded quickly and he offered a pleased smile.

"I don't have it written down - the females in my family guard these things like you'd never believe - but I do have a fair amount of time left before I must depart. Perhaps I could come up to the castle and I could show you...?" The look in his eyes was entirely too pleased and arrogant for his own good but she couldn't find a viable reason to call him on it this time.

Lucien felt whispers of hunger stirring deep within him as he easily kept pace with the younger female beside him. Annoyance filtered through her psychic scent and it made an amused smirk rise, unbidden, to his lips. The younger witch turned her head sharply at the rise in satisfaction in his own scent and then narrowed her eyes upon sighting his expression. He lazily applied a psychic shield and smiled at her. She gave a soft snort of disbelief and looked back towards their path. Lucien wasn't sure, exactly, where this path was

leading - all the bleak stone corridors looked the same to his eyes - but he had been told that they led to the potions classroom that was situated in the depths of the dungeons.

"Are we there yet?" asked Lucien, just to delight in the annoyed look the witch sent him. He liked that annoyed look. Her eyes sparked and her posture straightened and she looked so...well, it was best not to think of those things quite yet. Maybe in a few years he could return to them.

"If we were there, I would hope it was obvious," she replied stiffly.

His smirk widened. "Well, from what I've seen of this school, nothing is quite what it seems." Hermione scowled in reply.

They continued their journey in silence but Lucien could see the quick, curious, glances that she sent him every few minutes. She wouldn't have seen anything revealing and her light touches of White power only encountered firm Black strength. More than once, her gaze drifted lower, to his chest, where the Black jewel shone mutely in the dim light of the torches. Lucien knew she was curious about what he could do with a jewel so much darker than her own but also that she wouldn't ask. His sister had written detailed accounts in her bi-weekly letters home about the beliefs and regulations attached to the use of magic on Earth. It had saddened and angered him to think that the Blood's Craft had been lumped together so cruelly with the Wizard's magic. Perhaps it was because the Blood on Earth didn't fully understand their own latent power but even that did not comfort him. There was only one person who could claim true understanding of the Blood and of the Darkness of the Abyss and that person was his mother. Jaenelle SaDiablo wasn't about to even attempt to explain it, however, and so Lucien respected her wishes and did not press. His father had tried once and had been refused in his parents' bed that night. If Daemon Sadi couldn't manage something then Lucien didn't stand a chance.

Hermione stopped in front of a heavy, beaten, wood door. "This is the potions lab." She pushed open the door and entered. "I'm not sure if we'll be allowed in here..."

The Warlord Prince surveyed his new surroundings. It smelled of smoke and herbs; a strange combination of spice and sweetness and musk topped with a soothing warm scent that belied all the carefully tended fires the room had seen over the years. Green-gold eyes regarded the scorch marks that blackened the work tables and the circular sooty stains that mirrored them on the ceiling above. There were large oblong shapes in various shades of stone-grey all along the floor - evidence of all the spills that had occurred - so that he couldn't tell what the original stone had looked like. The room was well-cared for, that was obvious, but no amount of scrubbing could erase the warm care that wafted through the enclosed space. Someone had tried to make the room cold and imposing and, to anyone above the level of Opal, it had worked. He could feel the girl tense slightly and so he extended his Black Jewel's power so that she could see the room as he did. She relaxed but Lucien knew that her own brand of wizarding magic was warring with his stronger power and so she could only feel faint whispers of the warmth.

"Who would we need to ask permission from?" inquired Lucien politely. He saw her shiver as his breath ghosted over her neck and past her ear. Smug male satisfaction stirred but he did not allow it to show, knowing she would not appreciate it.

He could see the distaste as she spoke. "Professor Snape."

The image of a sallow-skinned man with long dark hair - greasy from hours leaning over cauldrons emitting fumes of all types - flitted to mind from one of his discussions with his sister (she was fond of sharing pictures mind-to-mind). His own memories supplied a dark robed male with a psychic scent full of disguised pain. He had only glimpsed him once but the impression remained. "I remember him," murmured Lucien. Hermione gave him a confused look at the blankness of his voice. "I think that, perhaps, we should collect our ingredients and work elsewhere. That male should not be disturbed unless necessary."

He got a strange look but the girl complied to his wishes and collected the ingredients he listed quickly. He nearly forgot the ingredient substitutions Kirra and his mother had devised but snapped back to attention when he felt a male pass by the warning

marks he had left along their path. "Hurry," he urged. His next words were calmer and more assuring despite being a lie. "I won't be allowed to stay past the curfew you have on visits to the town."

After collecting everything they needed Lucien vanished the objects. Hermione jumped and was amazed. "How did you do that?" she demanded.

"I simply vanished them," he replied, raising an eyebrow in confused amusement. "I know for a fact that you can do the same."

"Not with so many things!"

"Well I do wear the Black, darling," he drawled, laughing richly at the blush that spread across her cheeks at her own forgetfulness. "I have a much larger capacity for vanishing and calling things in. Besides, I've had much more training than you have. I've seen my grandfather vanish the entire Hall's worth of furniture and decoration." Internally, he winced at the reminder that he was her elder and she hadn't yet reached her majority.

"That's not possible," she declared stubbornly. "You couldn't do that even if you did wear the Black. It says so in my book."

"Books aren't always right." The voice that spoke was female and the dark power behind it made Lucien shiver.

His mother stood at the end of the hall. His grandfather was behind her, leaning on his polished cane with the silver dragon's head that Kirra had gotten him for Winsol last year. Beside the eldest SaDiablo was his sister's foundling Warlord Prince. The emerald-eyed male looked distinctly uncomfortable to be facing down against one of his best friends. Despite training to act above his age - to act like the young Lord he was - Harry would not be able to feel like anything but a child while in Saetan's presence.

Long blonde hair cascaded down her back, gleaming against the deep smoky grey of her tunic jacket and defined by the fathomless darkness of the black cloak. Sapphire eyes stared down the younger female. They were ancient and haunting and Lucien could see clearly

that his mother was no longer there with him - it was Witch in all her glory. The Twilight's Dawn jewel was jumping between jewel ranks too rapidly to sense it as anything more than a blur. He lowered his eyes in submission but Hermione did not understand what she was seeing and did not follow his lead.

"There are a great many things you are not aware of Ms Granger. A great many things that you will never be aware of." Her voice was a dangerous murmur of power, a howling in the Darkness, a whisper beyond the depths of the Abyss. "Do not presume to understand a world you live only on the fringe of."

"Lady," Harry's voice interrupted before she could speak again. "Please, forgive her, she doesn't understand - she can't understand - but don't do this to her. It'll only make it worse."

Lucien sucked in a breath. Witch stared at the teen who had stepped up critically. He was a Warlord Prince and she was a Queen, even if she no longer had a Court. She was dreams made flesh, she was Witch, and this male was arguing with her. Her gaze was unwavering but eventually she nodded and Jaenelle smiled apologetically. "I suppose I'd gotten carried away."

Harry grinned. "Maybe just a little," he murmured with a little chuckle.

Ginny yawned tiredly. She was exhausted. Not only had she been fighting with herself to stop trying to advance to the level Tom had elevated her mind to but she had also been having trouble sleeping. She had come to the conclusion, after much time spent after-hours in the library, that Tom was only able to communicate with her when she was exhausted in some way that weakened her mental shields. She had already begun pushing herself to learning under Umbridge's horrible teaching as well as secretly helping Neville with his own problems with his affinity.

It was rather obvious why she was still having conversations with the thing.

"I take offence to that," Tom sniffed. "I'm not a thing."

"Well I'd hardly call you a person," Ginny muttered back bitterly. Neville looked over curiously and she rolled her eyes, tapping her temple. The boy grinned and nodded understandingly and she punched him in the shoulder for mocking her.

"Well obviously."

"That's discrimination."

"Hypocrite."

He went silent after that. Ginny sighed in relief and Neville looked up from his new vegetation identification handbook to smile softly. "He's gone?"

"It is gone." Ginny stressed the word (she was still in denial that he - it! - existed at all).

"So what made him go away this time?"

Ginny sighed again and ignored his continued use of the masculine pronoun before she continued. "It told me I was discriminating. I told him he was a hypocrite." She frowned at her own abandonment of the neutral pronoun 'it'.

Neville laughed. Ginny scowled at him and looked over his shoulder to the portrait hole as it swung open. Harry had entered and was looking distinctly annoyed and strained. Worry crept up and she watched as Hermione followed not a foot behind, face red with shock or embarrassment, Ginny didn't know, and looking to be on one of the worst rants she'd ever done.

"She could be dangerous!" she was exclaiming in exasperation.

"She is dangerous, Hermione, I'm not denying that," Harry replied in a would-be patient tone. "But she is a danger that I trust. It's you I'm not so sure about." He paid no heed to her affronted expression. "Do you really not know what you were facing back there? That was Jaenelle SaDiablo!"

"Kirra's mother, I know," Hermione snapped back. "She was a powerful Queen in Kaeleer but she fell during the Purge."

"She is still a powerful Queen, Hermione. Just because she doesn't have a court doesn't mean that she isn't a Queen." He raked a hand through his hair. "If you think that the only thing she can claim is being a Queen then you disappoint me 'Mione. Jaenelle SaDiablo is Witch."

"Witch wears the Black. She was not wearing the Black."

"Witch was Kaeleer's Queen." Harry's voice had lowered. It was soft and dangerous and Ginny could feel the righteous anger even though she was across the common room. "Witch may not be Queen of Kaeleer anymore but she is still its Heart. Kaeleer's Heart wears Twilight's Dawn. Father, brother, lover; she could regain her former power if she wished." With that said, he turned on heel and marched away. Hermione stared, stunned at the hate reflecting towards her from the Boy-Who-Lived. She glanced over at Ginny and Neville and blushed.

"What are you two doing - listening in on our conversation?" Her voice was high-pitched and unnecessarily indignant and it made Ginny narrow her eyes dangerously.

"Why would we want to hear about your stupidity?" she spat, standing with clenched fists. "I'll ask that if you want to doubt Witch that you do it elsewhere. I'm more Kirra's friend than yours and I won't stand for insults against my friends or their families."

"Ginevra Weasley!" Hermione was appalled.

"Gin." Neville tugged her away from Hermione and towards the portrait hole. "I want to check this fact right here," he pointed randomly into his pamphlet, "we have to go to the library."

Ginny continued glaring at the bushy-haired prefect. Neville urged her along and she relented to being pulled after him. The portrait swung shut with a bang. It cut off her line of sight with the still-irate witch but it did not erase the anger burning in her veins. Tom shifted nervously

behind his barrier and did not say anything, even to calm her down. It couldn't be comfortable for him - having her anger pulling power away from the little that he leeches to remain 'alive' - but Ginny appreciated the thought nonetheless. Perhaps she didn't hate him quite as much as she professed. At least he had never insulted her friends; rudely worded his observations of them: yes, insulted them straight out: no.

KaeAskavi wished he had the ability to roll his eyes because that was what he felt like doing at the moment. He had pleaded to be allowed to come to Earth so that he could evaluate Kirra's living conditions personally and so that he could set up the perimeter of tangled webs that the Territory Queen-apparent of Arachna had made for the Lady's protection. The golden spider had a very imposing presence and the After-Purge generation of Kindred looked up to her for guidance as the Before-Purge generation looked up to the previous Arachnian Queen. The current Queen was born and took control around the time of the Purge and was a neutral ground between generations of Kindred but the After-Purge did not trust her so much as they trusted the Queen-apparent.

She was the Queen-apparent because she was the strongest Province Queen (rumoured to be as strong as the Queen who spun the web to hold dreams to flesh) and KaeAskavi knew her special secret that made them trust her even more. He knew that the Queen-apparent was the Queen who had spun the first web of many that would make the flesh become the dream.

The Lady trusted the Queen-apparent and so the Kindred would trust her with the Lady. But all this was just a reason to be on Earth; the reason he wanted to roll his eyes was pacing in front of him.

Shadow. The wolf wore his Birthright Purple Dusk because he had exhausted his Green hitchhiking on the Craft powered coach that had brought them to Earth in the first place. KaeAskavi had noticed him the moment they had climbed out of the coach and had only pointed it out to Legacy. The Healer had huffed in displeasure at her brother's show of idiocy and had thrown up a quick Opal healing web around him and ordered the Arcerian to take him someplace safe to regain his Green jewel before returning him back to the home den.

/ The Lady will not be happy/ he pointed out. The wolf snarled but the whiplash of Purple Dusk was nothing more than an annoyance against KaeAskavi's Sapphire. / I will set webs. You go back to den at Hall. /

/ I will stay with Lady, you will go back to Hall! ./

KaeAskavi growled warningly. / We both stay/ he agreed, placating the other male for the time being. / I will set webs and you will make safe the forest. /

Shadow considered this. KaeAskavi knew he had won the wolf over because Shadow's tail was still and his ears were pinned back. It would have been a gesture of annoyance in any other wolf but Shadow had always been different. When his tail swung absently KaeAskavi knew he was just drawing out his response for suspense and called in the first web. He sent it sailing through the air to the fighting-tree and passed it through the wood until it had been embedded and become part of the tree itself. Shadow watched him work with a lupine scowl.

He turned and left.

KaeAskavi wished he could smirk.

TBC...

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kinda a sad little list...plz ppl! more reviewers! plz!

Chapter#14

Harry was woken rather rudely from sleep by a blinding mental picture of the sun nearly risen. He jolted up from the gaudy scarlet comforter and glared at his snowy owl. Hedwig shot him a less-than-amused look when he promptly lay back down after sighting her. The sun returned and he grudgingly rose to a sitting position and fixed his slightly blurry gaze onto her. She ruffled her feathers in satisfaction and prodded the rattling Gringotts bag she had delivered near the start of term. With a resigned sigh, Harry put on his glasses and grabbed the velvet pouch. An impatient hoot sounded and he raised a brow at the female.

"Do you want me to open this or not?" The glare she gave him was answer enough.

With a faint smirk, the Warlord Prince loosened the ties holding the pouch shut. The rattling stopped as Harry upended the velvet thing and let its contents spill out onto the bed. A familiar seal was emblazoned on the rich parchment and a black drop of wax held the folds of the letter closed. But it wasn't the letter that caught his attention; it was the ring. He could feel strong wizard craft (as he had come to call the intricate twine of Blood Craft and magic) surrounding the old piece of jewellery and entwined into the gold that made up the band. His eyes traced, in detail, the hair-thin runes carved into the metal and the dark glimmer of powdered black moonstones - amplifiers and storehouses for magic and spells and therefore very rare and valuable. The elegant black gryphon had twin rubies for eyes and glinting citrine jewels for its claws. A plain white 'P' was in the background of the setting for the gryphon and Harry knew that this was the Potter Family Ring.

He could have spent more time examining the ring and even opening and reading the letter but his roommates were waking and they would wonder why Hedwig was in the room. Harry scrambled out of bed, grabbing his wand and opening the window with a simple spell. Hedwig gave a huffy little noise and took flight while her human dressed quickly. He didn't feel up to explaining his rudeness to Hermione to her other best friend and besides, he had to escort Kirra out to the Forbidden Forest to meet with his two favourite little

Brothers (though it was only really Shadow that his sarcasm was directed at; KaeAskavi was alright but would have been more liked if they weren't both Warlord Princes).

He jogged down the stairs to the dorms, pausing upon sighting a posted piece of parchment that hadn't been on the Message Board the night before. He frowned and took the time to read it, committing it to memory with a sic feeling in his stomach, upon reading the large-print title.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

All student organizations, societies, teams, groups, and clubs are henceforth disbanded.

An organization, society, team or group is hereby defined as a regular meeting of three or more students.

Permission to re-form may be sought from the High Inquisitor (Professor Umbridge).

No student organization, society, team, group or club may exist without the knowledge and approval of the High Inquisitor.

Any student found to have formed, or to belong to, an organization, society, team, group or club that has not been approved by the High Inquisitor will be expelled.

The above is in accordance with the Educational Decree Number Twenty-Four.

Signed: Dolores Jane Umbridge, High Inquisitor

His frown turned into a dangerous glare. So Hermione's little DADA club was a no-go. It wasn't a very promising thought after he had spent the rest of the weekend absently making lists of useful spells and leaving them out for Hermione to see and beam at. That meant that he had wasted time and that meant that he could have escorted Kirra earlier instead of waking up early to do so today.

He sighed tiredly and reached out with his mind to find that Kirra was already pleasantly awake and waiting for him in the entrance hall. / How did you wake up before me? ./ he demanded of her.

/ Coffee. Lots of coffee. / The slight tremble in her voice proved exactly how much caffeine she had coursing through her body at the moment. / Could you hurry up before I come down from my current high/

Harry grinned faintly and exited the common room. It did not take long to make his way to the entrance hall and after that it did not take long for him to find the young Queen perched on air near an opened window near the ceiling. He called on his Sapphire jewel and made his way up to join her. She grabbed his hand the moment he was within reach and he felt the tug of Black power draw him into the abstract winds that twined through Hogwarts grounds. They did not follow the normal shape of the Winds because of all the wards that had deformed them over the years but they still served their purpose if you had a gifted witch who could ride them on your side.

The two dropped back to Earth at the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A soft snarl later and a dark-furred wolf emerged, his Green jewel glinting from the chain around his neck. KaeAskavi followed behind, his Sapphire flaring with inner light at holding the wolf back from lunging at Harry. The human Warlord Prince grinned in amusement and nodded at the Arcerian cat in thanks.

/ Welcome. / KaeAskavi grunted and then snarled, swiping a paw to knock Shadow off his feet. / Sit or Healer Legacy be angry with both. /

"I've missed you!" Kirra exclaimed, launching herself into a furry pile of Kindred bodies. Shadow squirmed around to get as close to his Lady as possible while staying out of reach of another of KaeAskavi's self-preserving blows.

Harry yawned and settled on the dew-damp grass. This was going to be a long morning.

Kirra was angry. She was beyond angry, really. She was currently sitting out in Hagrid's cabin, softly plucking the spidersilk strands of her healing web and listening to the answering hum in the Abyss,

trying to decide which combination would work best for healing an owl who was also part Blood. Hedwig hooted tiredly and then flinched as a bad combination wreaked havoc with her internal sensory magic (the one that allowed her to find the recipients of her letters). Kirra jumped from her angry reverie and stroked the other female's feathers gently. "Sorry Hedwig. I didn't mean to drift."

Rex shifted from his perch near the open window. / She says she understands/ he translated once Hedwig had finished a small series of quiet owl sounds. He shifted again. / I am sorry I did not take better care of the Lady. /

/ It wasn't your fault/ Kirra assured him. / Hedwig knew what she was doing when she continued to help her bond-human. / It was a relatively new term that Kirra had learned. Rex had been unable to translate the term from the language birds used into the one that Kirra and the others he knew used. The result was the term bond-human and it was used to refer to all humans who had successfully found their animal familiars. It was a rarity (though the wizarding world liked to believe otherwise) but Hedwig had refused to refer to Harry as anything so generic as human.

Rex mewled softly in reluctant acceptance and then turned his sunset-red eyes back on his friend. Hedwig hooted loudly in surprise when her mangled wing suddenly righted itself. The cry was filled with pain and Rex shrieked in outrage. He flew across the room and Kirra backed up, understanding his rage at harm coming to his Lady (since Rex had made it very clear that he only helped Kirra because he liked her but that Hedwig called to him and he would serve her as though she were a Queen - he was under the impression that her half-Blood part was a Queen half).

"What's the matter wit' 'er?" Hagrid voice asked gruffly through the little brass ball. It was a form of communication she had given the half-giant when she had first met him. There was something about him..some sort of power that was fiercely protective of him...that called to her to keep in contact with him and to get to know him. She had called him immediately once Rex had come to the Ravenclaw dorms and told her frantically that Hedwig had been injured and that she needed a Healer. Kirra wasn't a fully qualified Healer but she had

got through half of her training and knew enough to manage something such as a sprained wing.

"It was just Rex," she assured him. "The web...er - spell worked so quickly that it caused a sharp spike of pain. Hedwig cried out and upset him. I think she's alright now though." The blonde was gently soothing the wing in question and letting her power flow through the feathered appendage and feel out the bones and muscles for imperfections.

"Describe 'er to meh," Hagrid ordered. Kirra smiled in amusement but relayed everything as she learned it. After performing a quick diagnostic spell (she had learned it from one of the Wizard Healers shortly after getting her wand - a 13" wand made of witchblood wood - from a large source that her mother had collected and refused to name - and with a core containing a strand of her mother's hair, a strand of her father's hair, and a strand of her own hair braided around a willingly given fang from a hell hound; a volatile and very territorial combination that made it impossible for anyone but her to use) she was pleased to tell him that her findings were indeed correct and that the only ailment Hedwig possessed was a slight inflammation where a chip of bone had embedded itself.

"Thanks Hagrid," she chirped before she closed the connection ball. He bid her goodnight and a safe return back to the castle before he closed his end up too. She vanished the communication ball and turned back to the two birds. "Rex, you'll keep her out of the skies, won't you?"

/ I will Kirra. /

"Then I'll be seeing you later. I've got transfiguration with the Gryffindors," she informed him. "You'll be able to drop by Kaeleer later and tell mama that my wand works with healing spells won't you? We'd never actually tried it - we were using a generic training wand up until this one was ready - and she'll be pleased to know it performs healing craft even with the witchblood."

/ I will tell her. /

"Thanks!" Kirra waved cheerfully - "down Fang!" - and left.

Harry grinned as he spied Hedwig soaring happily in the sky. The Room of Requirement was a marvellous thing that Dobby had showed him. The window had appeared shortly after he had entered (a good 10 minutes before Ron and Hermione were due to arrive) and had been absently wondering how Hedwig was doing. We sent her a burst of happiness at her well-being and she dipped her wing in his general direction before a familiar golden eagle came soaring down from his perch and herded her gently back to the owlery.

The door opened behind him and he turned to see Ron and Hermione enter. Hermione gasped at the sight of wall-to-wall books and promptly grabbed one, sinking into one of the large silk cushions. Ron kicked one of the cushions with a pleased look as he doubtlessly imagined some of the things they were to learn. Harry frowned. They hadn't even greeted him and already they were keeping secrets. He was reminded of his uninformative summer and had to quell his suddenly rising temper.

A knock sounded at the door and several students - Ginny, Neville, Lavender, Parvati and Dean - entered in a group followed by a curious Kirra. He wasn't surprised (he had known that she and her mother were incapable of keeping secrets from the other) and accepted the quick hug she offered. The contact offered him a leash for his temper and he grinned as she eyed the dark detectors with a single-minded intensity - no doubt trying to figure out how to replicate them to suit the Blood as well.

"Woah," Dean voiced finally, "What is this place?" Harry did not respond - he still remembered the awful questions he had been subjected to at the Hog's Head and the eager look in all their eyes - and so Ron took it upon himself to explain.

By the time 8 o'clock rolled around, all the silk cushions were filled and Harry locked the door. It clicked loudly and everyone stopped talking to stare at him as he turned around. His eyes narrowed upon the rude questioner from the pub and he cleared his throat before choosing to speak.

"I've been thinking and..." Hermione's hand was raised, "What, Hermione?"

"I think we ought to elect a leader," she replied promptly, as though in class.

"Harry's leader," Cho interjected, looking appalled that Hermione had even suggested he wasn't.

"Well I still think we ought to make it official. It will give him more power and -"

Kirra snorted and began to laugh. Harry watched her, lips twitching faintly with the effort not to join her. Hermione stopped short and everyone watched him, anticipating another demonstration on his behalf. "Harry - need - more power? So -" she couldn't even finish as she continued to laugh. Harry rolled his eyes and spoke.

"If you're quite finished, Kirra." She nodded but continued to snicker behind her hand. Harry smirked and nodded to Hermione. "I agree, it should be a formal vote."

Everyone agreed: Harry would be their leader. Hermione raised her hand again before Harry could even begin to talk. "What, Hermione?"

"I think we ought to have a name," she declared smugly. "It will promote a feeling of team spirit and unity, don't you think?"

"I hardly think that team spirit and unity are going to help defend us from Death Eaters," Harry responded dryly, making Hermione flush. "But if you want a name then, by all means..."

It was a short matter for Hermione to organize all their ideas and to finally agree that the name Dumbledore's Army was perfect. He and Kirra shared a look of annoyance at the final decision but did not comment.

"Right. If there's nothing else..." he shot Hermione an amused/annoyed look and she blushed, "I was thinking that the first

thing we should learn is Expelliarmus, the disarming charm. I know it's pretty basic but I've found it very useful -"

"Oh, please," said Zacharias Smith, rolling his eyes and folding his arms contemptuously. "I don't think Expelliarmus is exactly going to help us against You-Know-Who, do you?"

Harry's green eyes darkened into a piercing shade akin to Avada Kedavra. "I've used it against him," he informed the Hufflepuff chaser. "And, in case you don't remember or aren't aware, I'm the only one who's ever survived against him. In fact, I've survived against him oh, let me think..." he sneered, "four times. I think I might have an idea about what will and will not help you."

Zacharias did not speak again.

He quickly barked out some orders for them to get into pairs. Predictably it seemed like Neville was doomed to be without a partner but Kirra stepped up and hooked her arm through the pudgy boy's, dragging him to a section of free space.

"You can help me! I'm more of an illusionist than a dueller myself," she informed him cheerfully.

Harry gave out the instructions for the charm and the group proceeded to practice. Most of the charms were abysmal at best but there were a few who managed it. Harry doubted that any of them could manage to disarm him but they'd manage against...oh fourth years or so. Cho Chang had been trying the whole time to catch his attention but Harry had managed to avoid her for the most part. He had been dragged into a conversation about Crumple-Horned Snorkacks for his efforts but found the dialogue to be mildly entertaining. Luna certainly had an interesting view on life. Deciding that if he was going to bother with this club at all he might as well teach, he stopped them, gave them more instructions on how to properly preform the charm, and then set them at it again. He moved between pairs, helping and getting increasingly annoyed - though he hid it well.

By the time 9 o'clock rolled around, Harry took a slightly vindictive pleasure in informing the students that they had run past curfew and that they had better all hurry back to their dorms. Kirra shot him a knowing look but slipped out the door. He felt her Black jewel jump into the artificial winds created by the wards surrounding Hogwarts and jump off in the area he assumed the Ravenclaw dorms were. The rest he let leave in threes or fours - so as not to arouse suspicion.

Harry then endured listening to Hermione and Ron arguing over whose charm was better the whole way back to the Fat Lady's portrait. He felt that the punishment of their arguing was totally unfounded and wished he could meet the deity who had deemed him fit for such torture so he could give them a piece of his mind.

Blaise raised a brow at the look he was getting from the female across from him. He knew that she was upset but did he really warrant such a glare? "It wasn't my fault."

"What are you, five?" she snapped irritably, narrowing her eyes even more.

He set his book aside with deliberate calm. It was this, more than anything, that made the female wince in shame. "Sorry," she mumbled. He fixed dark eyes upon her slouched form and frowned. He had only met with her once since the beginning of term and said hello when in passing in the corridors but that certainly didn't mean he had seen that particular weekend robe before. He ran his eyes up and down her form, taking in the rich red tunic and cream pants and the black over-robe that parted casually to show the bold colour it covered. He eyed the glimmer of gold thread along the sleeves and hem. He leaned back a little in his seat and raised an eyebrow pointedly at the sleek line of lionesses that lined the bottom edge. Black dragon hide boots with plain buckles were of good quality but not brand new - Blaise especially liked the small feminine heel they possessed and applauded whoever was responsible for the respectable Pureblood attire his little Gryffindor now wore. "You like them?" she asked, voice tinged with a hint of female vanity that she normally had to squash in order to earn respect from her many brothers.

The Zabini heir smiled softly - a rare gesture he reserved only for his mother and, now, for the girl before him. "I love them." He delighted in the blush that she now sported, even through the soft scowl of annoyance. "I commend the instigator of this new outfit."

"I knew you'd see right through it," she muttered, smirking cheekily at him. He huffed at the assumption that he thought her incapable of dressing respectably. "Kirra insisted I get something new for winter and since she never actually wore these ones her grandfather got for her..." Ginny shrugged. "She likes to help people."

"And the boots?"

Ginny snickered. "She wanted them but they didn't fit; you should have seen her, she practically threw a fit in the middle of the store when they told her that the boots were a discontinued item and they didn't have any in her size. She wanted to get a size bigger and shrink - or smaller and enlarge - but dragon hide can't be altered once its been cut. I let her buy them for me just so she'd shut up."

Blaise did not reply, sufficiently surprised that Ginny had allowed anyone to buy her anything. Already his mind was running wild with improved ideas for her Christmas present.

"Don't think this means I'll let you buy anything fancy," she warned him blithely. "Kirra is the sole exception since she's a monster when it comes to shopping. Wore out the entire storekeeper community of Diagon Alley in one go, she did."

He sulked childishly just to make her giggle. "So how did your date go?"

"With Michael? It was crap," she asked and then answered herself bluntly right after. Blaise smirked smugly and propped his chin onto his palm, imploring her for details. "Of course, I haven't told my brother that yet. Michael's agreed to tell Ron we're still dating if he's asked but we aren't seeing each other anymore. My brother's so dense he won't notice a thing so I don't worry he'll catch the lie."

"I see." Blaise grinned wickedly. "Think he'll agree to a date with me and not notice?"

"With you? Blaise, you'd jump him the moment you were out of sight..and no one knows how to get a lover better than a Zabini."

Blaise thought of his mother - with her long dark hair, dark eyes and picture perfect figure - and smirked. The Zabinis had always put out particularly attractive children, no matter the non-Zabini parent. Technically, his mother should have had her name changed several times but she was the only child of the Zabini family and so - by old Pureblood law - was not allowed to take a new surname. Blaise was also an only child - though there had been a few close calls on that topic - and he knew his mother did not want another child. She had never really wanted children but he did not hold that against her. She had married young and born a male heir - something that was sure to please her parents - and had then flatly refused to bear a child again.

Blaise knew his mother loved him more than anything on earth. She had divorced all of her husbands (after they died of mysterious illnesses of course) because he had said he hadn't liked them. The resulting money went towards whatever it was that had caught his attention. The stables at the manor were filled with rescue foundlings he had pleaded with his mother to purchase. They had an old Nundu who had lost his ability to breathe its toxic breath, an Aethonan missing a wing and one with no wings at all (they had been mangled in an unfortunate accident and all that remained were two hard bumps at its shoulders), a blind Hippogriff, the dragon that guarded their vault at Gringotts was deaf and did not have his front left paw. There was a whole pack of stray dogs that wandered the grounds and the manor, a small army of cats living in the barn or the attic or the Cat Room - a room with tunnels, hanging decorations that jingled, a small indoor garden (with catnip of course), miniature castles, scratching posts, ornate couches and chairs (varying degrees of firmness) and at least a hundred cat toys. Not to mention the countless charities he had demanded they donate to.

"True," he agreed, smirking while he nodded. "But then again, it's not my fault he wears such...revealing...clothing."

"They aren't revealing. Just too small." Ginny snorted in amusement. "But I can see where you drew that conclusion from."

"Hn." Blaise stared at her. "Don't you have a Potter to check up on?"

"Oh!" Ginny jumped to her feet, eyes wide. She had mentioned when she first joined Blaise that day that she had been placed on Harry duty by Kirra (who was of the opinion that he needed to get away from Gryffindor Tower and that Ginny was the only one capable of being crafty enough to get them both out without anyone noticing) and had apparently forgotten. "Bugger! Right, bye Blaise!" She grabbed her bag and darted away. The dark-haired boy grinned and chuckled.

She still had ten minutes.

Footsteps. Blaise glanced back up and stared.

How...interesting. The Gryffindor was alone. In a library. It was almost mind-boggling. But then Blaise was a Slytherin and so he supposed it really wasn't all that exciting. At least, not outwardly. Inwardly, he was pulling his hair out from the roots at the absurdity of the sight. Gryffindors did not travel alone (he was going to pointedly ignore the female who had just left) and this one should not have been an exception to the rule. Especially considering this Gryffindor was also a Weasley (still ignoring the female...). The Weasleys were notoriously paranoid when it came to Slytherins and enclosed spaces.

"What have we here? ... a Weasley in a library? What is this world coming to?" Blaise drawled, smirking when the red-head whirled angrily to face him. He ran his eyes up and down the Gryffindor's clothes and took note of the worn school robes. Blaise knew Kirra and he knew that she did, as Ginny said, love to help people. He wasn't sure why she didn't want to help the male before him but he also knew that Ginny was very different from the rest of her family. He figured that the same reason he preferred Ginny's company to her brothers was the same reason that Kirra would help and spoil Ginny and not them.

It appeared that the male was fighting an internal battle with himself. Finally, he heaved a huge breath and spoke, "Are you Zabini?"

Blaise blinked. "I am - Blaise Zabini, if you want to know."

"Were you just with my sister?" The demand was curt and harsh. The Slytherin narrowed his eyes faintly - not enough to be visible for the other male. Dark eyes grew shadowed as suspicion flickered in his mind. He fingered his wand within his pocket in preparation of the worst-case scenario.

"I might have been. It all depends on who your sister is," he replied slowly.

"Ginevra Weasley. Were you with her?"

Blaise eyed his tense form warily. He was eternally grateful he had forgone his school robes and Slytherin crest this weekend. He just hoped that he was sufficiently neutral that the youngest Weasley male would not recognize him for his house. Blaise was a decent dueller but preferred academics and healing to fighting. "We were studying together. She was borrowing my Arithmancy text."

"Ginny won't understand fifth year Arithmancy," Ron stated, narrowing blue eyes dangerously.

"I think you'd be surprised what your sister understands," Blaise replied calmly but his voice was hard with suppressed temper on his friend's behalf. "Besides, I fail to see how who your sister is friends with has anything to do with you. She's fair old enough to make her own decisions."

"And what do you know about anything?" he spat back.

"I know that your sister is a different breed of Weasley. I know that she was possessed in her first year by a memory trapped inside a diary," Blaise deadpanned. "I know that she's best friends with Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood and that Kirra was the one who kidnapped Harry Potter from your Order's grasp during the summer." He pointedly ignored the gasp. "I know secrets about her love life

that you'll never know and," this is where he grinned wickedly, "I know that she can hold her liquor."

Blue eyes popped. "WHAT?"

Blaise stood and gathered his things with one swish of his wand and a soft-spoken charm. "Perhaps you'll actually see me in class, now that you know who I am. Good day." He left the library before Ron had a chance to articulate a reply.

Ginny glared at Harry darkly. "Don't even try and make up excuses. I know you have a lab in that trunk of yours and I happen to have a wonderful potion recipe that I'm sure will be very useful. I've got space to do potions but not enough ingredients, you do." One hand was propped on her hip and she stared at him expectantly. "Well?"

He sighed and looked up at her pleadingly. "Homework?"

"You've been done for ages," she returned easily. "I have a friend who saw you working in the library while Hermione and my brother were arguing up in the common room about something."

Harry winced, inwardly and outwardly. He stopped the frown that wanted to rise after the action. He hadn't displayed involuntary emotion in a fairly long length of time. It felt...strange. Strange but relieving. He felt something in him shift and shuddered as his magical core reached out hungrily for something before withdrawing. He glanced up at Ginny who was still frowning at him, waiting for a response.

He knew that Kirra was worried about him. She worried about everyone but she worried about him the most because Legacy was worried about him because of something that a Black Widow had said. He had been told that he would never meet this particular Black Widow because her protector would not allow it nor would the Dream Weavers. He didn't mind not meeting her but he wished very much that he could at least know what it was that the over-protective Healer and her Queen friend knew about him that made them so worried about his health. Kirra was worried that he was still affected by...that night. And he was affected, but he didn't want any help.

But still, Ginny had already told him (it was the first thing she said actually) that she wasn't here on Kirra's word. She was here because he had a potions lab in his trunk that was filled with all the ingredients she needed to make a very particular potion. A potion that she had written to Sirius for the recipe and had received along with several notebooks of other things that she refused to show him - even if she had no problem telling him about them.

"Well?" she repeated again.

"I don't know..."

"Oh come on!" she burst out. She thrust the recipe in his face and gestured excitedly. "Look at it! It'll only take a month and it isn't even all that hard...well," she frowned thoughtfully, "not for me in any case. But then I've got an unfair advantage of having a friend in the potions know-how."

"You wound me," Harry deadpanned. Ginny rolled her eyes in response. "I've never felt so unneeded."

"Oh you're needed all right," she said in a mock-assuring voice. "You have the lab and ingredients, don't you?"

"How reassuring."

TBC...

Chapter#15

Death lingered in the forest. Harry shifted uneasily and stretched out a delicate web of Sapphire power in case the thing that was bringing that feeling of death was dangerous. Beside him Ron was looking around with a frown for the creatures Hagrid had supposedly just called. Hermione's eyes roamed intensively in search of their subject. Just nearby, Neville stood. Harry caught his eye and silently asked the question that plagued his mind, / What do you think he's showing us? ./

Neville's eyes widened at the mental voice but a slow grin filtered onto his pale face. Harry dipped into the fringes of his unprotected mind to find the thoughts that were being directed at him. / Thestrals. Though, I'm surprised Hermione hasn't figured it out yet. /

Harry frowned thoughtfully. His mind had become infinitely more organized since he had come into his Birthright as a member of the Blood and ever since Daemon... well, Harry had taken careful time to put up plenty of nasty mental traps that would ensnare any intruders. Because of the effort and concentration it took to set up said traps, Harry had also developed a surprisingly tidy and organized mind. He found his memories of reading the Care of Magical Creatures texts easily and mentally scrolled through the pages until he remembered Thestrals.

He remembered being intrigued by the seemingly empty picture and then yelping in surprise as a reptilian horse swam into view and bared fangs at him. If he remembered correctly, there was a condition on seeing them... he growled faintly in frustration when he failed to remember exactly what that condition was.

Harry's attention sharpened when he felt something intrude on his sensory web. It felt like one of the hell hounds only...different. It had the same voided feeling and that ever present sense of the Abyss. It was like holes had been punctured in the rings of Jewel power and the Abyss was spilling inward to consume him but was being restrained by fine threads of power connected only to Darkness. It wasn't a very pleasant description but, unfortunately, it was the only one that gave you any hope when it concerned the dark beasts. The

demon-dead didn't mind them because they were dead and held onto their flesh only through thin threads from the Darkness. The reigning Queens in Kaeleer didn't mind the hell hounds but only Kirra, her mother and one other that no one would tell him about could actually be in their company without feeling as though they were being looked at like a piece of a particularly delicious meat.

The voided presence on his sensory web of power had entered the innermost ring and he snapped the power back in case the presence that Hagrid wanted to show them meant him any harm. Just before the web snapped he sensed a familiar Sapphire presence and smirked faintly. So KaeAskavi was still on Earth and watching over their Lady. He momentarily stretched the sensory web in search of Shadow but felt a soft probe at the edges of his mental shields.

Recognizing KaeAskavi, he reached out to meet the spear thread. / Shadow has gone. The Lady returns him last night. /

/ Thank you for telling me/ Harry replied as he drew back the power fully.

"Why doesn't Hagrid call again?" Ron whispered to the dark-haired male. Harry levelled him with a less-than-amused look. Honestly, he knew his friend wasn't exactly the brightest crayon in the box but still...

Harry shivered in delight at the sight of the Thestrals. They had blank, white, shining eyes and a reptilian face and neck. The body was that of a skeletal horse with great black wings. It surveyed the class, swishing its long black tail as though unimpressed with this years batch of students, before it bowed its head and began to tear flesh and meat off the dead cow Hagrid had brought along. A few more appeared but Harry was focussing on the first one to come. It was the largest and the darkest and the voided feeling it gave off was also surrounded by a proud sort of wisdom.

He took a step forward and held out his hand, letting a brief flare of Sapphire power from his ring attract the attention of the dark creature. Hagrid watched Harry and then beamed. "Yeah, I knew you'd be able to see 'em, Harry," he said seriously. "Now..raise yer hands, who else can see 'em?"

Neville nervously raised his hand and Hagrid nodded. "You too, Neville, eh? An' -"

"Excuse me," Malfoy sneered, "but what exactly are we supposed to be seeing?"

"Thestrals," Harry murmured, quieting the nervously chatting students around him. The Thestral had abandoned the meat and was nosing curiously at Harry's palm where the young wizard had swiftly flicked his ever present stiletto down to make a slice in his palm. The skeletal horse licked at the blood, keeping its eyes locked on Harry to show its appreciation of the gesture. Harry grinned, reaching up to stroke the beast's cheek with his free hand.

Hagrid's grin grew even bigger. "So you know what they are do you Harry? Righ', well Hogwarts has got a whole herd of 'em here. Now, who knows -?"

"But they're really, really unlucky!" Parvati interrupted. She looked almost comically alarmed at the confirmation that there really were Thestrals amongst them. Harry smirked. "They're supposed to bring all sorts of horrible misfortune on people who see them. Professor Trelawney told me once -"

"No, no, no," Hagrid chuckled as though this bit of information was the most ridiculous thing in the world, "tha's jus' superstition, that is, they aren' unlucky, they're dead clever an' useful! Course, this lot don' get a lot o' work, it's mainly jus' pullin' the school carriages unless Dumbledore's takin' a long journey an' don' want ter Apparate - an' here's another couple, look -"

Two more of the animals suddenly appeared, one of them right near Parvati. It brushed against her on its way to the meat and she shivered and pressed herself closer to the tree. "I think I felt something, I think it's near me!" She sounded close to hysterical. Harry frowned at her.

"It won't hurt you," he told her, still petting the largest Thestral, who was now pressing against him insistently for more affection. He

grinned at it and held out a hand to the still frightened girl. "Come here," he ordered patiently.

"What?" she exclaimed in a harsh whisper - she had noticed Hagrid watching Harry curiously - as she looked at where his hand was stroking (to her) thin air. "Are you petting it!"

"Come here," he repeated, this time offering her a soft smile as well. His hand was still outstretched and he took the step forward to take her hand in his. "They're really quite soft."

The girl trembled and tried to pull out of his grasp. Harry held firmly and enticed the Thestral closer with a lingering stroke that pulled away and had the winged horse-creature following the male towards the girl. Harry grinned when the reptilian head snapped up in curiosity at the female standing beside the giver of the petting. White eyes gleamed as it stuck its head forward and nosed at the joined hands. Parvati's eyes widened and she stiffened in fright. Harry raised an eyebrow at her and pulled her forward, shifting his fingers within hers so that her palm pressed flat against the strong neck of the creature.

"Feel that?" he asked, waiting for her to nod before continuing, "that's his neck." A snort was heard from the invisible creature and Parvati jumped when it nosed her elbow. "Don't be so jumpy," he chided in amusement. "Hagrid's already said he won't hurt you. He's just curious, see?"

She slowly began to stroke the long neck, a hesitant and still very nervous smile quivering to life as she discovered the silkiness of its mane. Harry grinned as well, removing his hand from hers as she continued to explore the creature with a feather-light touch.

Hagrid was beaming at them, having just finished explaining to the class why not everyone could see them. He had stopped in time to see Harry persuade the girl to greet the creature she had just been afraid of.

Neville grinned as he watched Harry help Parvati get over her fear of the reptilian horses that she couldn't even see. For all his secrecy, his dark little aura of power that he tried desperately to hide, his budding realization of exactly how he affected the world, and his continued

obliviousness to some of his fellow dorm-mates , Harry really was born to be a teacher. Neville had been present for the first DA meeting and he had seen how Harry had reacted to it all. The male who had turned an icy temper on them in the Hog's Head had acted similarly near the beginning. Neville had been partnered up with Kirra - the blonde was friendly and helpful, trying to explain the charm but still failing at it herself - and he would have been the first to admit that they needed help.

Harry had seemed to sense this need and had stopped them. He had demonstrated the charm done properly and had then gone about the class, correcting and helping. Perhaps he hadn't been aware, or perhaps Neville knew him better than Harry knew himself, but the shy Gryffindor had seen the contentment in his face and in his eyes, even if it was hidden behind annoyance.

He jumped in surprise when Harry nudged him with a grin. "You going to pet them?" he asked teasingly.

Neville chuckled nervously, scratching his arm as he eyed the Thestrals. "You know, I think I'll leave that to you and Parvati."

"Suit yourself." Harry shrugged but an amused smile played across his lips.

"Hem, hem." Neville shuddered when he felt the sudden chill in the air. Harry had gone still and one look told him that Harry's eyes had taken on a glazed sort of calm look. When he shifted and his hand brushed against Neville's, the boy felt the iciness of his skin and was startled when his Affinity cried out that something dangerous was nearby. Neville quietly brushed against the awareness in his mind of his earth affinity and was startled when it burst out - so loudly that he felt the nearby trees tremble - that Harry was the threat.

Hagrid had never heard Umbridge's fake cough before and glanced at the closest Thestral in concern. Neville wanted to laugh at the sight but intellectually he knew that the half-giant's reaction was not a good one in this case.

"Hem, hem."

"Oh, hello!" Hagrid smiled once he located the source of the noise. Harry hummed quietly under his breath and Neville shuddered at the haunting tune.

"You received the note I sent to your cabin this morning?" Umbridge spoke in a slow loud voice that made Neville bristle at the implications of such a tone. It was one usually reserved for young children or stupid people and Hagrid was none of those. Certainly, his definition of 'dangerous' was vastly different from most of the world's but that did not mean he was stupid. It simply meant that he was capable of handling the dangerous things and was unafraid of them. "Telling you that I would be inspecting your lesson?"

"Oh, yeah," Hagrid smiled brightly at the short toad-like woman. "Glad yeh found the place all righ'! Well, as you can see - or, I dunno - can you? We're doin' Thestrals today -"

"I'm sorry?" she said loudly, cupping her hand around her ear and frowning. Harry, who had been swaying boredly beside Neville, went perfectly still once more. The chill increased by at least half as he slowly removed his piercing stare from the winged creatures and turned it upon the green-clad woman. "What did you say?"

Hagrid looked a little confused. He had spoken clearly, more clearly than normal even, but this woman acted as though he hadn't spoken at all.

"Er - Thestrals!" he said loudly. "Big - er - winged horses, yeh know!" He flapped his arms in mimicry of wings. The hopeful look on his face that Umbridge would understand him this time was shot down when the woman clicked her tongue and began to write on her clipboard.

"Has...to...resort...to...crude...sign...language," she murmured as he quill darted across her parchment. Neville wished very much that he could encourage the tree above her to uproot itself and squash her like the toad she was. Harry looked like he would like nothing more than to methodically break each and every bone in her body. Ron glared angrily and Hermione simply stood trembling in suppressed rage.

"Well...anyway..." Hagrid flustered, turning back to his class with a downcast glint in his beady eyes, "erm..what was I sayin'?"

"Appears...to...have...poor...short...term...memory," Umbridge muttered - though it was loud enough that the whole class heard it. Malfoy and his goons snickered and looked as though Christmas had come early.

"Oh, yeah," Hagrid shot the woman an uneasy look but continued on bravely. "Yeah, I was gonna tell yeh how come we got a herd. Yeah, so, we started off with a male an' five females. This one," He patted the horse that Parvati was still stroking and who stood nosing Harry's once-more bleeding palm (though no one could see that), "name o' Tenebrus, he's my special favourite, firs' one born here in the Forest -"

"Are you aware," Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him in a way that would have made Neville's grandmother rage and storm and cause such a ruckus at the Ministry were she present to witness the act, "that the Ministry of Magic has classified Thestrals as 'dangerous'?"

"I'm apparently dangerous as well but you don't see people not allowed near me," Harry murmured but his voice was a deadly croon and everyone heard it, even if they tried not to. "Well, except those too frightened and they don't really count." Neville pretended that the snide comment wasn't amusing in a vague attempt to not laugh.

Hagrid was the only one who didn't hear the Gryffindor. "Thestrals aren' dangerous! All righ', they might take a bite outta yeh if yeh really annoy them -"

"Shows...signs...of...pleasure...at...idea...of...violence," Umbridge was scribbling at her clipboard again.

Parvati made an odd hissing noise that was echoed by a low rumble from Harry. The two were both paying special attention to Tenebrus, even going so far as to exaggerate their stroking so that the rest of the class could see - the slower students beginning to realize the significance of hands moving in rhythmic patterns in mid-air.

"No - come on!" said Hagrid. Neville knew he was getting really anxious now and resolved to try and help him in whatever way he could. "I mean, a dog'll bite if yeh bait it, won't it - but Thestrals have just got a bad reputation because of the death thing - people used to think they were bad omens, didn't they? Just didn't understand, did they?"

Umbridge did not reply. She continued to scratch away at her clipboard. When she finished she punctuated her last note with a pronounced flourish that disturbingly reminded Neville of Gilderoy Lockhart. He made a face and locked eyes with Blaise Zabini (Neville had been polite with the Slytherin for Ginny's sake but was now a friend in his own right to the other boy - they had even had a few friendly snogging sessions before). The dark-haired male looked annoyed, one hand resting lightly on the nose of a small mare who stood nervously behind him. The Zabini heir owned a Thestral of his own - a middle-aged mare with a fondness for lamb - that he used to travel to the cottage his mother had purchased for him to use to get away from her current husbands when they got on the male's nerves or when the Ministry came by to snoop around the manor for dark arts artifacts that the Zabini family had owned for ages.

"Please continue teaching as usual. I am going to walk," she mimed the action, "among the students," she pointed at the surrounding members of the class, "and ask them questions." She pointed at her mouth to indicate talking. Neville flicked his eyes towards Blaise who had straightened and was moving to intercept the route the woman was beginning to take with her questions.

"Erm...anyway," Hagrid shot Umbridge an odd look, not understanding why she was acting as though he did not understand normal English. "So - Thestrals. Yeah, there's loads of good stuff about them..."

"Do you find," she began with Pansy Parkinson, "that you are able to understand Professor Hagrid when he talks?"

"No...because...well...it sounds...like grunting a lot of the time..." she was giggling loudly and Hagrid flushed where his face was unbruised.

"Er...yeah...good stuff abou' Thestrals. Well, once they're tamed, like this lot, yeh'll never be lost again. 'Mazin' sense o' direction, jus' tell 'em where yeh want ter go -"

"Assuming they can understand you, of course," Malfoy drawled, sending Pansy into another fit of giggles. Umbridge smiled at them and Neville sincerely wished that he would not have to see that aimed at him.

When Umbridge turned she took in the sight of a Slytherin standing resolutely beside a Gryffindor and promptly ignored Blaise. The male frowned but his face hardened when she turned to Neville, himself, instead. "You can see the Thestrals, Longbottom, can you?"

"Yes," Neville responded quietly but not without distaste.

"Who did you see die?" The indifferent tone made Neville tremble in anger.

"My grandad."

"And what do you think of them?" She waved at the half-devoured carcass where Neville could see the small portion of the herd still steadily making their way through the dead flesh.

Neville knew she expected him to act the part he had always played - the act of the nervous Gryffindor who went with the majority and didn't stand out in any of his classes. Even his favourite class - Herbology. Instead, he gave an affectionate grin and reached out to touch the mare that Blaise was steadily petting within the horrible toad-woman's peripheral vision. Umbridge shifted away quickly when the mare gave a pleased snort and brushed against her on her way closer to the two boys.

"Oh I like them," Neville responded easily, missing the calculating but approving look from the green-eyed Warlord Prince across the small clearing. "My family used to have one that came by the manor every Sunday to come along on walks with my grandad but it died shortly after my grandad did."

"The Zabini's own a mare," Blaise piped up, smiling outwardly but eyes glinting maliciously. "They're really only dangerous if you don't know how to treat it with respect."

Umbridge looked considerably put-out at the comment but Neville noticed that her quill - which had been scribbling rapidly near the beginning - had slowed to a crawl upon his standing up for the Thestrals. She finished up and turned to look back at Hagrid. "Well, Hagrid, I think I've got enough to be getting along with. You will receive the results of your inspection in ten day's time." This was accompanied by more mocking miming and Neville was only hanging onto his anger by the calming thread of his Affinity anchoring him to the steady beat of the earth.

Hedwig shifted on her perch moodily. That ridiculous toad-woman had ruined her feathers and had mangled her wing. Her bond-human hadn't been to see her for a time since she had been accosted trying to deliver a letter. She hadn't wanted to be injured and she knew that it really wasn't her fault that she had been attacked but it didn't make the hurt any less. Golden eyes glared down at the students who thought they were clever to sneak out of their dorms and send notes late at night. Her bond-human had been sneaking out for ages but he didn't do it for silly things like notes.

You really should be resting, Rex commented idly, preening his feathers lazily.

Hedwig wished she could snarl. She settled for shrieking loud enough to rudely rouse the sleepy day-hunter from his half-asleep watch. He nearly fell off his perch and she tensed, prepared to shoot out of the owlery before he could catch her. Piercing summer-red eyes glared up at her as he righted himself and casually spread his larger wingspan, blocking her only escape route.

Bastard, she spat.

So I've been told, he replied mildly. You are still not fully fit for deliveries. Consider yourself lucky that you're allowed to fly at all.

What makes you think you have any right to decide if I shall fly or not? she demanded angrily. Her feathers bristled and she clicked her beak - sending the owls nearby to higher roosts. None of them wanted to face Hedwig when she was angry - even the vicious eagle-owl, who belonged to one of the Slytherins and was unofficial king of the roost, put some distance between himself and the sole snowy owl. Rex paid their actions no heed, putting himself stubbornly in the path of her only escape.

I do favours for Kirra because she saved my life, he cooed smugly. Kirra asked me to make sure you do not strain your wing before it has time to properly heel and I am only too pleased to acquiesce to her request. My lady. He made a motion that, among the wizarding owls, denoted utmost respect amongst equals or when the recipient was of higher rank. She recoiled in surprise and then glared harshly, hissing at him in distaste.

No grand gestures are going to make me less angry.

I didn't think they would, he admitted, rearranging his wings more comfortably. But I would rather you rest at least this night more so that I might not worry so that you are over-exerting your wing.

The sincerity made her hesitate. She was a fine owl - envied even - and she was the one that new mothers brought their fledglings to in order to be taught the basics of proper delivery. Hedwig allowed the little ones to carry her letters for a short time (during those hours when Harry was inaccessible), having them bring it to different areas of the school as she circled above watchfully so that they could get a feel of how to lock onto their target (using that instinct that wizarding mail-creatures all had because of the magic that was woven into their very being). Very rarely did she need to be looked after - it was always her looking after others. The concern that was being displayed unnerved her.

Fine, she consented warily. But tomorrow I am going hunting and I will tutor Gwyn's fledglings at midnight and you will not complain.

Fair enough. Now, he nudged her affectionately and made a purring noise, to your perch for a night of rest. I'll have the Dark One (that

was the eagle owl's title as chosen by the roost) bring you supper and I will stay and watch you so that you cannot escape.

Bastard.

I love you too, lady.

Ginny worked on her potion's assignment silently. Tom was busying himself with pricking some of his knowledge into her mind so that it was easier for her to do the assignment. It was hardly necessary though - he had done it so many times that she knew most everything that he provided for her. It wasn't very difficult to make a sleeping draught (though it was if you asked anyone else in her year - which she didn't) and Snape had never been particularly nasty to her. Perhaps it was because he had seen her sitting with Blaise while he worked one of his potion's assignments - sitting and curiously studying the instructions and occasionally asking questions - perhaps it was because she was the only person in her class not to melt her cauldron. Whatever the reason, he paid little to no attention to her and she received a steady grade of Acceptable in his class (which basically meant a high level of Exceeds Expectations to anyone else).

"Are you alright? You just about stirred clockwise there." Ginny blinked in surprise and looked down at her hand, surprised to see it turning without her conscious decision. Tom pulled his power back and she felt his barriers tremble. She had almost been afraid that possessing her arm had been an easy task and her mind had flashed with thoughts of her first year. The feeling of exhaustion at the simple task of keeping an arm moving made her relax her shoulders but her back remained slightly stiff as she forced her magic to layer over his walls and reinforce their strength.

"Sorry," she mumbled mentally. "I was thinking about the potion...we need to add the valerian and the powdered moonstone tonight. If we don't then we could be out for weeks because of the potency."

"I fail to see the appeal of this potion. It is doubtful that you will even be able to use it because of me."

"Even if I can't use it, Harry still can."

"That, also, is doubtful."

"He may be strong but it is unfocussed... perhaps this potion will help."

"Ms. Weasley." Ginny looked up at Severus Snape as he peered down his nose at her potion. His brow was furrowed in an indifferent frown that he wore mostly as instinct while in the class. "This is not to your usual standards." He was speaking in a quieter tone than the other students couldn't hear. Ginny felt her face heat up slightly and glanced down at her potion briefly. She almost winced at the sight. It would be acceptable to any other Professor but to Professor Snape she knew it would not earn her a pass.

"I see that, sir," she murmured. "I have been distracted and I apologize." Severus Snape was the only Professor who could get an apology from her. She may dislike his prejudice against the Gryffindors but he had never been overly cruel or totally unfair towards her. In return for this small kindness, she tried to keep her standards up to his expectations and, if possible, above. To hear that she was falling below his usual standards for her was a blow - even if she had an explanation. Potions was not Tom's best subject and she took pride in knowing that the work she produced was mostly, if not all, her own.

"See that it does not happen again. You will stay after class and clean up the room so that you will be more inclined not to make the same mistake twice." It was not the worst punishment he could have come up with. He could have forbidden her from using magic to clean. Then again, considering the ingredients they were using, it would be a good idea to reduce the use of magical cleaning. She nodded her acceptance and bottled her sample of work, labelling it neatly before bringing it to the front of the class to hand in. The magical chime that signalled the end of class sounded and the rest of the class fled the dungeon room and the foreboding potions master.

Ginny began her work by going around and ensuring that all the fires had been properly extinguished. Snape settled at his desk and began marking what looked like first-year essays. She smirked faintly when she watched the lines and lines of horrible red ink (the kind he

favoured for marking as it stood out so well) fall onto the parchment. With an amused shake of her head, she went around and gathered up the cauldrons - bringing them to the sinks and fixing them with annoyed glares when they threatened to spill any contents down the drain.

Tom grouched about the unfair punishment but she ignored him with a roll of her eyes. After clearing away any leftover ingredients and returning the ones that were still useable, she cleaned each work station with a firm scrubbing spell her mother often used. This was followed with a tricky little spell she had found in one of her uncle's old books that removed residual magic from the area that could potentially ruin delicate potions. Snape raised a brow and looked up when she muttered the incantation. She sniffed delicately as if the slightly quizzical look offended her. He smirked faintly and returned to his marking.

To finish her work she hand-scrubbed the cauldrons and set them aside to air dry. She scanned the classroom critically before going to stand in front of Snape's desk patiently for his verdict on her work. He glanced up after she had been standing silently for a minute and swept his own dark stare over the room. He took in the drying cauldrons and then glanced at her for her explanation for the unfinished work.

"A drying spell could affect the cauldron." She didn't bother to waste time explaining further. He was a master and he would know the rest of her explanation without her telling him like he didn't already know.

"Very well." He narrowed his eyes. "Get out of my sight." She nodded and left the room quickly, a smirk playing across her face once she was out of sight.

Ginny hurried to return to the common room before her brother realized she was late getting back. He would find out that she had been held back after class and he would write their mother like the tattle-tale he was. The Fat Lady let her in with a smile and the youngest Weasley grinned when Neville looked up and waved her over.

"Good class?"

"My draught wasn't as good as it should have been. Snape had me clean up the class so I wouldn't mess up again." Neville scowled but she rolled her eyes. "Hey, I happen to agree with the greasy bat. My potion was pretty low quality compared to my usual work. He even had to take my arm for a bit because I drifted off."

Neville looked at her sharply. "He did what?" he asked warily.

"Don't worry - he's barely awake now. It's nothing like my first year," she assured him quickly.

"You'll tell if anything else happens?" He eyed her carefully.

She smiled affectionately. "You'll be the first to know."

TBC...

Chapter#16

Harry shot up in bed, the last remnants of a scream on his lips. The Sapphire Jewel on his bedside table flared dangerously on its chain and the whiplash of power sent the crowding boys near him flying back with dull thunks as they hit their own beds. His mind was in disarray and he struggled to figure out the proper configuration of Kirra's implanted shields. They crumbled to nothing the moment his mental probe hit them and he winced as a wave of nausea hit him full force. He rolled to the side of his bed and promptly vomited.

"He's really ill," a scared voice whimpered from nearby. "Should we call someone?"

The sting of the phantom poison continued to flow mercilessly through his veins. Distantly, he was aware of Rex demanding what was wrong and if it was safe to let Hedwig past. He could hear KaeAskavi intercepting the spear thread and he could feel Kirra running shields on all of them so that no mental probes would make the Warlord Prince's vicious temper rise to dangerous levels. Already he could feel the all consuming burn of fury and the whispers of cold deadness that signalled his upcoming rise to the Killing Edge.

He heaved several deep gulps of air, reaching out shakily to grab the Sapphire where it sat and calling in a fine chain of silver. It had been a gift from Jaenelle - a chain she had kept with her and had made sure was saturated with the scent of dark-jewelled Queens he had come to know. The psychic scent made a leash for his power and he reigned it in as best he could on his own before he turned blood-shot green eyes to his best friend. "Ron..." he began shakily, "Your dad's...been attacked..."

"What?" Ron looked so confused that it made Harry growl in frustration, pupils contracting like a cats as he glared at the boy.

"Your dad!" He snapped, trying to sit up without the wave of nausea. "He's been bitten, it's serious, and there was blood everywhere -"

"Harry mate...you were just dreaming."

Ron was looking at him oddly and Harry snarled. It was not a sound he had made since coming to school - he hadn't needed to make it since start of school. It was a sound that was too feral and dangerous to come from the golden-boy's lips and that was probably what sent Neville off with a belated: "I'm going for help!"

"No!" He grabbed Ron's arm in a painfully tight grip and Ron winced; it would bruise. It was crucial that Ron understood what was going on. Ron wasn't one of the Blood - he wasn't aware of the distinct differences between dreams and visions and he wasn't aware of the true significance of a Black Widow's own carefully spun shields crumbling to dust. "It wasn't a dream. It was a vision straight from -"

"Mr. Potter." Professor McGonagall looked far too dishevelled for a woman of her character. But she was female and she had a severe temper that the Warlord Prince in him would not ignore and so it quieted as she spoke. "What is it? Where does it hurt?"

"Where doesn't it hurt would be a better question?" He smirked grimly, taking perverse delight in the annoyance of his fellow dorm-mates and his Head of House. "It's nothing I haven't been through before - at least, the pain. The vision on the other hand..."

Her expression tightened but he could see the horror clearly written across her face as he briefly detailed what he had seen - telling how he had been the one to do it. He also saw the disbelief in her eyes and the confusion and fear from Ron and Dean and Seamus and wanted desperately to leave.

"I'm telling the truth."

"I believe you, Potter," she said curtly, standing and staring at him. "Put on your dressing gown - we're going to see the Headmaster."

He felt the rage and fury rise again. He didn't want to see the Headmaster! He didn't want to subject the fragile mental walls to the subtle mind prodding he had felt on more than one occasion from the wizened old man. His walls wouldn't be able to hold against that and

the slippery grip on the full strength of his Sapphire power would fail and the Warlord Prince he needed to suppress on Earth would be set loose for at least the next week. As much as he loved Kirra as his Queen, he did not think that he could stand to be around her for quite a long time. She would not be able to stay his temper as Legacy would be able to and he fretted rising to the Killing Edge while still in school.

Still, he could not directly deny his Head of House and so nodded and hurriedly got ready, vanishing the vomit and calling it back in inside one of the toilets in the bathroom, using a flicker of the Sapphire to flush before anyone noticed that he was not using wizard's magic.

Harry took up his glasses and settled them carefully on his nose. The Sapphire he clutched in one hand went to its proper place around his neck and the silver chain from the Queens followed it so that he could remain calm with their psychic scent filling his nose.

"Weasley, you ought to come too." Professor McGonagall looked at the visibly confused and scared Ronald and beckoned him impatiently to follow. Harry was already standing and only a foot or two behind the elderly woman.

They made their way past Neville, Dean and Seamus out of the dormitory. They exited the Fat Lady's portrait entrance and into the moonlit corridor. Harry felt the whisper of Blood that came from Hedwig as she circled in the sky above the castle. She wanted to join him but could not find an entrance and was being followed insistently by a worried Rex. He shuddered as a wave of instincts rose in him to go and comfort one of his females and both Ron and McGonagall glanced at him carefully. He looked away, smiling faintly at Mrs Norris as she stared at him. He liked the old cat now that he was aware that she was one of the Kindred (and she rather liked him if truth be told - he was a male and he had learned that she accepted kindness and offerings of food as well as any cat and made sure to do so often; never let it be said that she was unrewarding to the kind humans). She couldn't wear a jewel but she was undoubtably a Blood Female and she was loved dearly by her male. Affection coated her psychic scent and it made it very hard for Harry to see her as the ominous presence she had been in his youth. She took in his haggard form

with her lamplike eyes and brushed a questioning tendril against his weakened mind. He accepted the gentle touch and then sent phantom hands to brush along her spine in thanks for the small donation of power that she had left to help support his crumbling walls. She sniffed haughtily and hissed in distaste at the Professor when she was shooed rudely away.

"Fizzing Whizzbee." The voice broke his thoughts and Harry glared at the gargoyle as it sprang to life and revealed the constantly spinning staircase. They rode it to the highly-polished oak door with the gaudy brass knocker in the shape of a gryphon. Even though it was late there was a babble of voices and it made Harry scowl when he recognized them. The former headmasters and headmistresses needed to learn when to keep their unwanted opinions to themselves - especially when they barely even held their old memories (that's what time spent as a portrait did to you - especially if you weren't particularly powerful).

McGonagall rapped three times with the knocker and Harry scowled. He shifted around her before she had the chance to stop him and shoved the door open more quickly than it was quietly swinging. He entered just in time to see portraits snapping back into sleep and for Fawkes to trill sleepily in amusement.

"Don't bother to fake it." He growled at them. Fawkes made a faint noise that sounded like an 'I told you so' and Harry flicked his gaze over to the phoenix before turning green-eyes towards Dumbledore.

He wore a deep gold and purpled dressing gown over a snowy-white nightshirt and had his gaze fixed sternly on Professor McGonagall and appeared wide-awake despite all else. Harry tugged at the green dressing gown he wore, absent-mindedly smoothing his hands over the animated gold Occamy that slithered along and bared fangs at the portraits. There was only one on the entire article of clothing and it had taken to hissing angrily at anything and everything it thought annoyed its wearer (mainly Harry - though Ginny had stolen it for a few nights because she had informed him that she needed something warm to wear while taking over his potions lab in his trunk).

"Professor Dumbledore, Potter has had a...well, a nightmare."

"With all due respect, please do not insult me, Professor." Harry interrupted. "It was a vision - and I do know the difference. Black Widows know their craft well and half of my tutors had a fang."

The Headmaster stared solemnly at Harry or, rather, at a point just above and past his shoulder. "Please explain."

Harry growled. "You could at least look me in the eye, Headmaster." His voice turned into a low rumble as he crossed his arms across his chest. He continued as though he did not see the flicker of suspicion cross the old man's face. "I saw Mr Weasley being attacked by a large snake...Nagini I suppose."

The words reverberated in the air and did not sound nearly as comical as they would have. Ron looked back and forth between Harry and Dumbledore, as if seeing the tension there for the first time, white-faced and shocked as Dumbledore leaned back at stared at the ceiling pensively.

"How did you see this?" The wording did not elude Harry. He knew what the Headmaster was asking and he had the answer.

"I was the snake. I saw it all from the snake's point of view."

If it was possible, Ron paled even more.

Dumbledore looked at where Ron stood and then asked in a sharper voice, "Was Arthur seriously injured?"

"Yes. I don't mean to be rude but, Headmaster, have you ever actually seen how large Nagini's fangs are? Mr Weasley is bleeding out and bleeding out very fast."

Finally, as if it only sank in when Harry used his Warlord Prince Court voice, Dumbledore began to get to action. He set two portraits to find Arthur and Harry stared at him without actually listening. He was reaching out to thank Mrs Norris for the boost of strength and power as well as to reassure Hedwig that he was safe and to apologize to Rex for causing his chosen-lady distress. He thanked KaeAskavi for

running the interference and touched base with Kirra about the goings on. She hastily spun new shields for his mind and set them in place with a whispered apology for not teaching him to build his own. He waved her off and assured her that he was well aware that the new shields were only temporary and that he wasn't to strain them or try and suppress his instincts except in the slightest to keep from the Killing Edge.

Harry stood silently and watched the horror unfold. It wasn't quite nearly as bad as it seemed, after he thought about it. Well, to him at least. To Ron...Harry didn't think his friend was taking it as well as he should have. People got hurt all the time and being bitten by a snake wasn't nearly as bad as anything that Harry could think of. Long, languid strokes and slow shattering was a much better example of horror. He felt that first twinge that came with rising to the Killing Edge and pulled back from those morbid thoughts before he slipped into that river of cool calm that was running just beneath the surface of his skin.

He looked up at the portraits as they all set to 'waking up' a clever-looking wizard in Slytherin green and silver. When the portrait gave a theatrical jerk and 'woke up' his eyes flitted across the room. Harry raised a brow when the former headmaster's eyes settled on him appraisingly and then glanced curiously at the enchanted Occamy-embroidery who hissed soundlessly from its spot draped over Harry's shoulder.

"I'll go - but only because the young Lord wishes it so." He said and he made a big show of being very reluctant about it all as he left.

Dumbledore peered over his spectacles at Harry but now it was the teen who was ignoring his elder. He stared off blankly, sharing a quick conversation of pictures and feelings that detailed the night's events so far to his feather-friend. Hedwig sent a thankful feeling to him - glad to be the only honoured companion being told directly from Harry instead of by the Headmaster via Harry.

Harry tilted his head back when Ginny sidled up beside him and poked him hard in the shoulder. The Occamy flapped its wings rapidly to reach her fingers and then twined eagerly as she brushed along its

spine. Harry trembled as her fingers brushed across a ticklish spot near his neck and then he glowered at her. She smirked cheekily in return, even as her eyes glinted worriedly. "McGonagall says you saw dad get hurt." She commented softly - too softly to be heard by anyone else as they all listened to Dumbledore's explanation.

"I did." He offered a reassuring smile. "The healers at St Mungo's will take care of him. Worse comes to worse, we'll get Kirra's mum to pay him a visit. Who knows poison better than a Black Widow?"

She smiled faintly and he saw that the tenseness she had concealed within her shoulders had dropped almost instantly at the reassurance. "So Kirra knows?"

Harry hesitated and then sighed. "Hedwig knows and that means so does Rex. He'll report to Kirra and she'll have her mum on speed-dial, so-to-speak, in a second."

Ginny grinned weakly at the bad muggle-pun. "Dad always butchers that one, you know."

Harry's amused look dimmed as he thought about the probability of Dumbledore allowing Jaenelle anywhere near Arthur Weasley if he found out that she was also a Black Widow and Witch. To reassure the younger female he tucked her close against his side as they reached out to touch the blackened kettle that had been turned into a Portkey together. Their world was sent into a swirl of colour and wind and magic as a sharp tug behind Harry's navel let him know that this was going to be a particularly uncomfortable ride.

"Wormwood..." Ginny scowled as she failed to locate her carefully prepared plant. Harry shifted slightly and flicked his wrist lazily. She looked up sharply as the ingredient was carefully levitated above the cauldron where it hovered questioningly. Instead of being annoyed at the help on the potion that was - technically - her work, Ginny nodded. "Put it in. We have to let it simmer for ten minutes and then we pull back the heat by half, stir clockwise 8 times and once counter-clockwise before we add the sage and mallowsweet."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the reputedly hallucinogenic ingredients but didn't say anything. The burning sage and the heat from the

cauldron flames were making him sleepy and he was eternally grateful for the comfortable couch that was camped out along one wall. A splatter ward (kind of like an invisible wall that you could walk through) spread across the side of the room so that one could observe the reactions of potions during experimentation. He watched with dark-rimmed eyes from lack of sleep as Ginny shuffled over and slumped down beside him, tugging away half of the cream-coloured blanket he had filched from his bedroom compartment to snuggle up into while she waited for the standard potion's timer to go off.

They were supposed to be sleeping so that they would be rested when they went to visit Mr Weasley at the hospital in the morning. Harry would have tried to sleep but Ginny was too worried to even attempt so he was keeping her company while she worked on her mystery potion.

"So...what are you making anyways?" He ventured, grinning when she smacked him in the arm and frowned scoldingly. "Fine, fine. Keep it a secret, see if I care."

"You'll know very well what it is once its finished." She informed him. "Especially if you read any of the books on Professor Snape's recommended reading list."

"His what?"

"Recommended reading list." She gave him a funny look and then smirked slowly. "Oh, that's right, he doesn't like you. If he liked you then he'd have mentioned it. In a backward and snarky kinda way, sure, but he'd have told you in any case." She shut her eyes and looked thoughtful. "'Perhaps, Ms Weasley, you should stick to your muggle books, though it would hardly make a difference on your abysmal essay.'" She smiled and opened her eyes. "I got a P on that one. Thing is, I hadn't used a muggle book for the essay, like he'd implied, and he damn well knew it too - because of the bibliography he made us include. So I did as he'd implied I should and checked some muggle books. Did you know that the first-year books have mistakes in some of their procedures? He always gives the correct ones on the board but nobody listens to them because the ones in the book are easier. The ones on the board are more difficult but he

doesn't tell how much of which ingredients to use - just tells us the ones from the book. If you don't want to fail you need to check the properties of the ingredients in the muggle books and then cross-reference them with the high-end potions ingredients charts so that you know the correct amount to use."

Harry gaped. "Then how does Hermione do it?"

"Hermione uses the median amount between Snape's instructions and the book's and then she follows the book's instructions." Ginny smirked. "It's a clever way around it and it'll produce decent potions but the best ones - that earn even Gryffindors an O - are the ones done the way I do it."

"How do you know she does that?" He looked sideways at her, eyes narrowed cursorily.

Ginny shrugged. "Blaise told me."

"Blaise...Zabini? From Slytherin?"

"Course. " Ginny smirked. "Did you know he was Neville's first proper kiss?"

"You know, there are some things I could go without knowing." Harry ducked the punch aimed at his head. "Hey! Come on, it's just that he's...a Slytherin. I haven't exactly had good experiences with them."

"Blaise isn't bad. He's one of my closest friends. Don't tell my mum but..." she grinned mischievously, "I'm going to Blaise's over the summer hols. She thinks I'm going to Luna's but, truth is, Luna's agreed to cover for me and her dad's in on it too."

"Wicked." Harry smirked. "Wish I could do that - but the only place I would go would be the burrow, or Headquarters now, I guess, and Dumbledore says I've got to stay at Privet Drive."

"That's your problem, Harry." Ginny looked at him seriously, eyes flickering dark in the pale light of the lab. "There are other houses and

not all of them are loyal to Dumbledore. If you made the effort...well, I know Blaise has several ways of skirting the headmaster's notice."

"Really?" Harry looked calculatingly at her. She was staring at the dwindling timer and her back was tensed to get up and attend to her potion. "Examples?"

"Oh, blood wards and the like. Goblin magic is useful as well - if you have a half-decent goblin solicitor. Regular solicitors work wonders as well. Bribes too." She waved her hand dismissively and got up to stand ready at her potion, eyes glued to the timer. "Can your Sapphire raise the heat back up by half in less than 5 minutes?"

"Talking to Kirra again huh?" Cinnamon eyes narrowed and he wiggled his fingers. "Just say when and it's done."

"Hold up...just let me add this..." she picked up a small opalescent stone and smiled. "This is the last thing and then it'll be done. If we let it age - like wine - for 2 weeks then it will be stronger but it'll probably do you over something fierce." She smirked. "That's why I'm making a calming draught with Snape."

"You're what?"

"You heard me." She scowled at the implied insult against her favourite professor. "Unlike you, as I've said before, Snape doesn't hate me. When I said I wanted to do a potion on my own and he found out which potion it was he practically jumped all over me to help...in that weird not-actually way he has. He said he needed a full essay on why I wanted to make a calming draught and he agreed the same day I handed it in." Harry caught the more-haunted than necessary look in her eyes and felt the coolness of his temper rise up again at the idea of one of his female's being upset.

He backpedalled mentally and blinked. His female? Since when had Ginny become one of his females? Certainly, they had been around each other much more than usual - what with her mystery potion and all - but did that really make her his? The Warlord Prince inside him practically purred in contentment. Oh yes, it said, Ginny was most definitely his female. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and

then yawned widely, eyelids drooping once more to half-mast. The red-head looked over and her face softened.

"Tired?"

"Very." He yawned again and heard a soft song in the back of his mind coming from his connection to his familiar (he had only discovered it after the untimely demise of his mental shields and was very glad for this new, quicker, and clearer way to communicate with his beautiful snowy owl) trying to lull him to sleep. "I think my feathered mother is sending me to bed."

"Hedwig?" Ginny grinned. "Do you know how happy she'd be if you called her that?"

"I'd probably be getting a lot more sleep and plenty of toads in Umbridge's morning pumpkin juice." Another yawn swallowed up his last two words but he knew Ginny understood him from the amused smirk playing across her lips. He stared at those lips for a moment before snapping out of it and reclining lengthwise on the sofa. "I'm going to sleep now."

"Same." Ginny walked through the barrier - green ripples spreading through air to signal her passing - and slumped onto the sofa with him. He shifted, eyes closed and already half-asleep, to pull her down with him. It didn't take much effort on his part to tuck her securely beneath his chin and to get the blanket draped over both of them. The sage was making his mind hum pleasantly and the sweet smell of honeysuckle that was Ginny's brand of shampoo. It mingled with ginger and cinnamon and a few other spices that reminded him of the Burrow's warm kitchen and he tightened his hold on her, nosing the top of her head like a content cat. "You're a pretty good pillow." She murmured, snuggling more comfortably against him.

"Hm." He cracked one eye open to watch her sly smile and the faint rosy hue across her cheeks fade away. "I'll take that as a compliment as I'm sure you don't mean that I'm fat."

"Course not." She mumbled and yawned silently. "Just comfy and warm like a pillow."

"I feel so used."

"At least you are used - unlike a certain brother of mine..."

"Didn't need that picture of my best friends, you know."

"Shut up and go to sleep."

"Shutting up." He grinned and pressed an affectionate kiss to the crown of her head. It made his lips tingle and something warm to curl in his belly and then spread to the rest of his limbs. It had probably been the first female contact he'd been allowed to give in a long time and it calmed every part of him immensely. She mumbled something unintelligible and he began to drift off. It wasn't long until they were both fast asleep.

Ginny woke a few hours later comfortably warm, wrapped around the waist by and pressed up against something that smelled of eaglewood and a soothing masculine scent that filled her senses and made as if to lull her back into sleep. Stubbornly, she fought and sleepily raised her head to find Harry lying with his eyes closed and a surprisingly content and peaceful expression. She shifted and a frown marred his features before she felt his arms (the things wrapped around her waist) tighten before he calmed and heaved a heavy sigh. She smiled affectionately and reached up from under the tousled blanket to brush some particularly long hair out of his face. He mumbled something and one eye cracked open a fraction. She smiled at the slit of green and then smothered giggles when he yawned and then groaned faintly beneath her.

"Wakey-wakey sleepyhead."

"Sleep-sleepy...sleepy." His response was lame and barely audible but she still heard the whine. When she moved to sit up he pulled her back down sharply and tucked her back into place. "Mine." There was an adorably possessive hint of growl in his voice and she thought - for just a second - that it might be worth it to just stay put.

"You have disgustingly sweet thoughts sometimes, you know." Tom mumbled, equally sleepy as Harry but far more disgusted sounding. "At least try to keep them to yourself."

"Get out of my mine, brat." She shooed him away and triple-locked her shields before returning her attention to the tired teen who seemed intent upon making her into his teddy-bear for the next several hours.

"We have to get up before someone notices we aren't in bed." Ginny informed him. He glared up at the ceiling of the lab for a moment before sighing and dragging a hand along his face. She grinned when his other arm slipped from around her waist and released her. She stood up and watched in amusement as his Sapphire flickered and called in his glasses right onto his face. She jumped when a large wrapped package dropped onto the ground and he grinned at her.

"I brought a present!" He exclaimed cheerfully even as his eyes were dark sunken circles of exhaustion. "You looked upset last night and..." his features softened considerably and his voice went serious, "well, this was supposed to be your Christmas present but I figure you could have it now. Especially since he doesn't like me very much."

Ginny glanced down at the package between them more carefully now. It was roughly square shape and if she looked she could see small holes here and there. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion and she looked up. Harry shrugged and looked away, a slight blush rising. "He's really smart and he looked lonely when I saw him at the shop. The owner was practically giving him away because he drove her bonkers but she said that he's been trained for deliveries if you wanted..." With her curiosity peaking, Ginny tore at the package and then gasped in delight at what she saw.

The Jobberknoll was bright blue with snow-white speckles scattered all over its body and a gleaming white breast. It peered up at her quizzically with glinting black eyes and cocked its head adorably to one side. It clicked its beak and, with two quick flaps of its wings, clung to the bars of the spacious cage and stuck a portion of its head out to get closer. It was a small thing - about the same size as Pigwidgeon if not a touch bigger - but Ginny could see the strong

muscles in its wings when it flapped them again. She looked up at Harry in awe and he smiled affectionately.

"Cute, isn't he? I knew you liked potions and I remembered that their feathers were used in memory potions and figured he'd be an appropriate gift. He's not Kindred or anything supremely special and there was at least a half-dozen more in the cage but, like I said, he looked lonely." His smile turned mischievous. "They can't make any noise unless they die so he can keep you company without disrupting anything and you can use his size as an excuse for not sending huge letters home all the time and, since he didn't cost more than a galleon, he falls well within the general Weasley family acceptance range in terms of gift-giving."

Ginny glowered half-heartedly since she was being given the most adoring look from the blue bird that she had ever seen. With a sigh that signalled her defeat to Harry (since he grinned like a Cheshire cat and leaned back smugly), she opened the cage door and let the little fellow fly out and dart over to land on her hand. It nuzzled against her face when she brought it close and she smiled despite her supposed annoyance at receiving him in the first place.

"You know, if he ties himself tightly enough to your magical core, you can do some wicked things - like sharing vision. I can do that with Hedwig now - since Voldemort destroyed my mental shields - and we're going to work on sharing hearing." He tilted his head as a sly grin flickered to life. "Imagine what you could do if you learned even just the vision part with him...you could spy on your brothers and they wouldn't notice cause he's so small and silent..."

She looked down with newfound appreciation for her new pet and then smiled. "Alright, I'll keep him - on the condition you don't go trying to get me a new Christmas present to replace you giving him to me early."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Fine. Now, didn't you say we had to go somewhere?..."

Harry was dressed in a pair of dark muggle jeans and a black t-shirt for some muggle band that Kirra had liked. He'd pulled on a black trench-coat with big buckles up the front that Jaenelle had gotten him

because she thought he'd looked cool in it and a pair of leather gloves. His hair was as messy as usual but he'd been surprised to find it seemed to have grown out a little and so the weight pulled it down from its usual gravity-defying proportions. His glasses were imbedded with a clever spell that tinted them in bright light and cleared them in the dark. He glanced in the mirror that hung in the bathroom of his trunk (it was where he was at the moment - changing) and took in the dark look he was sporting.

He shrugged indifferently - figuring that it was no less different than what other muggles he had seen before wore - and left into the common room. He looked up and reached for the lip of the trunk he knew was above him but that he couldn't see. His hands touched solid wood and he heaved himself out with a practised ease that came from having practically lived in it the entire time he was in Kaeleer (it was the safest way to avoid being harassed by the other males and dragged into awkward conversations with the other females).

"Hey." He looked up sharply to see Ginny standing in the doorway, the little blue Jobberknoll perched possessively on her shoulder. She followed his gaze and then returned amused cinnamon eyes to his green ones. "His name is Baron - like the Blood Baron - since I know that it'll get Ron's knickers in a twist to hear that my familiar had a better name than his."

Harry chuckled and reached out to pet the little one only to receive a sharp nip to his covered fingers. It didn't hurt but he withdrew his hand quickly and smirked in amusement. "He certainly has the personality for it."

"Speaking of personalities..." she gave a quick appreciative glance up and down, "you certainly do pull off the punk look well."

"You think?" He spared his outfit another look and shrugged once more. "I think the only thing I actually picked out are my socks."

"Kirra took you shopping?"

"Kirra went shopping; I sat on a bench and waited for her to get back."

Ginny laughed. "Sounds like Kirra."

TBC...

Chapter#17

Tonks watched Ginny and Harry carefully. Ginny had a small blue and white speckled bird sitting on her shoulder, glaring out at everyone within a five foot radius from the girl (Harry was excepted from this rule). They both looked tired but the exhaustion that was present on the faces of the rest of the Weasley family was disturbingly absent from theirs. Ginny was smiling at Harry as he shrugged his shoulders and an amused smirk played across his lips.

Nymphadora slipped across the room and tripped to stumble right in front of them. The blue bird (it was a Jobberknoll, she could see now) tilted its head and flapped its wings in silent annoyance.

"Wotcher, Harry!" She chirped, feeling her already vibrant hair grow even brighter in response to her happiness.

"Wotcher, Tonks." He replied, eyes dancing with mirth as he turned from getting his glove-covered finger pecked indignantly for his efforts at calming the little bird. "Your hair is looking wonderfully vibrant today."

Despite herself, Tonks blushed. It wasn't often that she got commented on her outrageous hairstyles for any other reason than to be informed that it was freakishly outrageous. To hear that he thought it looked vibrant instead of freakish was a welcome change. "Thanks, Harry."

"It was my pleasure." Ginny was grinning at the smooth tone he was using while Tonks fixed him with a disbelieving look and he rolled his eyes at both of them. "Fine, I'll just stop giving compliments then."

Tonks snorted and Harry stared at her with glinting green eyes that were bright with amusement. "Did you know that you're my cousin - through Sirius being my godfather?" He asked mischievously, opening his arms with a wicked smirk. "Can I get a hug from my favourite cousin?"

Ginny smacked him in the arm and he continued to grin. "What? It's not like I bite...hard." He tossed his head back and laughed while both females rolled their eyes at the silly joke following his random comment.

But that comment got Nymphadora thinking. Harry was right. They were cousins. She eyed the younger male carefully as he continued to converse quietly with Ginny. The youngest red-head was keeping carefully out of her mother's view and being sure to have Harry close by at all times in order to escape a scolding for accepting the little blue bird on her shoulder (it was obviously a present - and now Tonks knew why Rose (an old friend of hers from school) had been so delightfully wicked and dropping hints with her all weekend: she had been delegated to take care of the Harry Potter's newest purchase).

Tonks considered her own holidays (as that was the nearest thing that required presents) as a child. Her mother always tried so hard to be sure that their holidays were as full as possible - as if to make up for the lack of presents and the lack of family around their little three person clan. She looked over at Harry as they travelled on the train.

He was still sticking near Ginny, snickering as the little blue head of the Jobberknoll poked out of the pocket of her red winter jacket repeatedly. She thought about what she remembered of his summer with the Dursleys - of all the chores she had witnessed him doing while she was on watch - and she frowned in distaste. Even if she hadn't had many presents during her holidays, she had at least had a caring family around her. She felt the fiercely protective stirring of her Black blood and narrowed her eyes determinedly; she wasn't about to let her little cousin spend another summer alone with those awful muggles - Dumbledore be damned!

Several stops and a short but brisk walk later and the group of witches and wizards found themselves staring at a mannequin standing inside the window of an old-fashioned, red-bricked, department store that claimed to be called Purge and Dowse Ltd. Tonks rolled her eyes at the 'Closed for Refurbishment' sign and beckoned the group towards her. She could tell Moody's eye was spinning beneath his bowler as he watched everyone within a hundred foot radius suspiciously. Harry tilted his head curiously to

one side and watched with unblinking green eyes as Tonks scanned their group.

"Right." She declared once she was satisfied with the amount of attention she was getting. "Everybody ready?" She turned to the dummy and winced at the horrible sight. Wanting to get it over with (she had never liked going through magical barriers - they always screwed with her metamorphmagus disguises), she leaned close to the window and began the normal security measures to enter the hospital. "Wotcher, we're here to see Arthur Weasley."

She grabbed Ginny and Mrs Weasley (they were the closest) and ended up dragging Harry along as well. She twisted her face up to hold the pink hair and the less pixie-like features she preferred. When they came through the other side into the waiting room, she felt two hands steadying her when she faltered for lack of concentration on her surroundings. When she turned, she was faced with worried emerald eyes. Harry's hair fell forward and into his face but he wasn't paying it any attention. She felt the soft leather of his gloves brush against her neck when she straightened up and then was startled to find that he was at least an inch taller than her. He grinned as though he knew what she was thinking before he took the few steps it required to stand at Ginny's elbow and take in the sight of the room at large.

She inconspicuously rubbed her shoulders where his hands had supported her. Something was clinging to her magic and twining around her and it originated from where he had touched her. When her magic didn't try and dispel the foreign sorcery, she let it be and followed quietly as Molly found where Arthur was being kept and as the older woman led the way through the hospital. She wiggled her fingers at Harry when Mrs Weasley bustled him into the room - scolding him for even thinking he wasn't considered part of their family.

Harry stiffened the moment he scented the angry female aura. It lingered strongly on Mr Weasley and every muscle in his body felt coiled and unbearably tight as the frigid calm of his power surrounded his mind and tried to bring him to the killing edge. He trembled from head to toe without giving his body consent as images that were his and yet not flashed across his mind.

Something warm and fiery and intensely hot brought him back to his own mind and he found narrowed cinnamon eyes staring into his. He saw the red hair and smelled the unique psychic scent of Ginevra Weasley and immediately reached out to grab her hand, eyes wide as he struggled internally to keep himself under control. Baron on her shoulder looked like he wanted nothing more than to be able to screech as he fidgeted and flapped his wings in terror. Harry belatedly realized that he was joining with that part of himself and only just managed to snap back to reality before he went too far.

"Sorry." He murmured instantly. "But that smell," he shuddered, "I didn't think I'd ever have to face that again."

Ginny didn't understand - no one did - but she nodded anyway and turned to her father and kissed his cheek before taking a seat in one of his conjured chairs. Harry stood stiffly behind her seat, eyes taking in the room and lingering on the one he knew was a werewolf. He brushed against the other's mind and found the inner wolf snarling and howling to be let out. He retracted quickly before it noticed him and looked at Mr Weasley with a careful grin. It wouldn't do anyone any good to know that he could actually converse with the wolves but he still felt the suspicious stare of the sickly-green male who belonged to the wolf at his back.

They had been speaking of Mr Weasleys wounds and somehow the Weasley Head had managed to slip in a comment about the werewolf to Harry's back. When Mrs Weasley gasped and asked if it was safe to have him in a public ward, Harry stiffened as did the male from on his bed. He really did like Mrs Weasley but sometimes...sometimes he wished she would just keep her mouth shut. He heard the mournful howl of the wolf echo along an open psychic thread and grit his teeth and tried to block it out. He had managed to repair and enhance some of the mental shields while Ginny had been sleeping but they were still far too open and were still reaching out in an attempt to check each unshielded mind for a threat. He inhaled the dark scent of the Queens from the chain around his neck and sighed heavily. Hopefully he could talk to someone about mental walls soon - he didn't even care if it was Snape.

When they were abruptly (at the fault of the twins) shoved out of the room, Harry turned to Ginny with a curious expression. "The twins wouldn't shut up about your vision and what dad was doing." She muttered, managing to keep her attention on all conversations going on. "Take an Extendable Ear and just listen."

He nodded and accepted the fleshy-coloured length of string, whispering 'go' when he was bid to do so, and waited to hear something. The first thing he heard was Tonks and his focus sharpened.

"...they searched the whole area but couldn't find the snake anywhere. It just seems to have vanished after it attacked you, Arthur..." she sounded slightly uncomfortable to be calling the father of one of her school mates (Charlie) by his first name, "but You-Know-Who can't have expected a snake to get in, can he?"

"I reckon he sent it as a lookout," Moody's growling voice was heard next and Harry rolled his eyes at Baron (who was peering at him curiously for signs of what his opinion of the conversation were) as if to say 'well obviously', "there's something funny about the Potter kid, we all know that."

Harry removed the Extendable Ear after that; there was no point in listening if it was all speculation. Speculation he could probably guess on his own anyway. He leaned back against the wall of the hallway and let his head fall back to rest against the cool stone. His eyes closed and he waited for a sign that the others were finished with their eavesdropping. He cracked one eye open and stared in boredom at the others who were staring fearfully at him. He raised an eyebrow and then shook his head, standing up and looking down the hallway boredly.

"I think I saw a sign for a tearoom a little ways back...anyone want anything?"

After Harry wandered off for tea and was scolded for his wanderings upon returning, they made the trip back to Grimmauld Place. The others were still giving him trepid looks and he decided that perhaps it

would be best to avoid them until they could get their rampant feelings back under a modicum of control.

He spent some time in his trunk, napping while vague dreams of stone corridors and doors plagued his mind but mostly ignoring them. After a brief nap, he felt slightly refreshed and shifted between compartments to the potion's lab where he checked on the progress of Ginny's potion. Something about it was prickling with familiarity but he sternly resolved not to try and figure it out until Ginny told him - he respected her want for privacy, after all.

He strolled a little through the halls and found the others still avoiding his eyes and so he found a room with a wide window and called, through his new mental link with her, Hedwig. The snowy owl came soaring into the room and then launched into a tirade of pictures and sounds and motions that eloquently scolded him for not contacting her earlier. He shared his vision with her and stroked her back soothingly until she was satisfied with the attention and questioned what he really wanted of her. He smiled and held out the envelope full of order forms.

"It's my Christmas presents." He explained. "I'll be needing a few more before I'm finished with my newly expanded list."

"Expanded?" Harry loved his familiar's mental voice. It was light and airy and floated through his mind like a gentle breeze. "This certainly feels like a fair bit more than simply 'expanded'."

"It is." He agreed with an amused smile, ignoring the sound of a door opening behind him. "Now get going and make sure that they wrap everything nicely - peck them if you have to."

"Oh, they'll do what you want, my human." The possessive tone made him grin. "I'll make sure of that." And with that and an affectionate nip she took flight - a ghostly presence floating silently on invisible currents of air.

When he turned away from the window he was pleasantly surprised by the sight of Ginny, waiting patiently for him to finish with his familiar.

"I know you stopped listening." She informed him bluntly. "So you missed the part where Moody said that Dumbledore thinks you're being possessed by Voldemort." The name rolled off her tongue dripping with contempt. Harry raised his eyebrows in slight surprise. "I'm here to tell you that you haven't been possessed, if it'll make you stop ignoring us."

"I'm sorry," he opened his arms and waited for her to settle in his lap comfortably (she knew from Kirra and the others that he would doubly enjoy even simple female contact with his awakened Warlord Prince) before he would continue, "but they're all giving me funny skittery looks and it was beginning to make me insane. I figure, if they know me at all, they'll come find me when they're ready to talk about what they heard."

"Right." Ginny deadpanned. "You do know that they think you're avoiding them because of it all?"

"Really? I hadn't the slightest clue." He rolled his eyes upward dramatically. "I've only been Ron's friend for, what, four years?"

"Oh, ha ha Prince." She grumbled and something stirred within him at the use of his Blood title. "Pick on me for assuming that you still might be a little clueless when it comes to males."

"As opposed to my absolute mastery over females?" He retorted dryly.

"Have you seen the way they look at you?" She demanded, twisting to peer at him. "Half the female population would fall all over themselves just to get a grin out of you."

"Yourself included?"

She snorted in reply and he laughed, hugging her tightly to his chest and tickling her sides with a few deft movements of his fingers. She giggled and then shoved him back, laughing at his affronted and deeply (falsely) wounded face.

Sirius hummed as he busied himself with hanging garland and Christmas baubles and silver and gold streamers. Beside him, Harry

was smiling faintly and wrapping presents with a careful precision that Sirius admired (his own presents may as well of been wrapped solely in spell-o-tape for all the good he was with wrapping paper). Curious about where he'd learned to do such remarkable work, he queried: "Where'd you learn to wrap presents that nicely?"

"At the Dursley's." Harry replied easily, frowning for only the briefest of seconds before smiling again. "Can't say all my time there has been a waste. At least I can cook, unlike my aunt."

Sirius froze at the response. He could practically see all the hidden secrets Harry had behind the seemingly simple reason and he knew that it was more painful than Harry wanted him to know. He wished he could leave Grimmauld place and pay the Dursley's a visit...teach them a lesson for messing with his godson! The viciousness of his animagus form made a low growl rise in his throat but he squashed it the moment the green-eyed wizard turned to look at him curiously. Something all-knowing was reflecting from the emerald orbs and it made Sirius return almost frantically to his decorating.

Fool! Fool for thinking such thoughts. He berated himself mentally even as he hummed a carol while working. He had not fallen into such animalistic thoughts since leaving azkaban - hadn't wanted to. He loved being able to change into his wild-form and all the perks that came with it but sometimes he was reminded of just what form he took. For all intents and purposes, it appeared to be simply a large black dog. But Sirius knew the truth - his form was part myth.

His animal form was a half-breed - a nice kick in the balls to his family, who would have balked at the very idea that one of the Black could become half anything - part dog and part Grimm. The Grimm portion allowed him a modicum of control over shadows; enough that he could use them to make himself mostly invisible at night but not useful for much else. It allowed him excellent night vision and a shadowy grace that did not suit normal dogs.

The Grimm half also made it very difficult to appreciate all of the different points of view and plans that came with working for the light side. The Grimm naturally wanted to only think of its pack and its immediate family; Harry, Remus, James and Lily - were they still alive.

It wanted to go through any and all lengths to protect that pack and severely and ferally and horrificly punish all those that wronged its pack in any form. Some of the images it came up with were disgusting even for Sirius - who had lived with the Grimm half of his mind ever since he became an animagus.

He'd fallen for the will of the Grimm only once - when he'd come up with the plan to send Severus Snape to see Remus while the werewolf was free from its human cage. James had heard and had stopped both Remus and Sirius from doing something neither of them would want if they had been in their right minds. Sirius had sworn to never fall victim to his Grimm again.

But the thought of any harm coming to the youngest of his pack - his close-enough-to-truth son? It was very hard to resist some of the tempting ideas that the great beast could come up with.

He briefly touched the Opal at his neck and sighed at the hum of power. Becoming one of the Blood had helped him reign in all but the barest hints of his Grimm blood so he knew that when the Grimm began to effect him that he must have been really angry. He looked at his godson and watched the boy neatly spell the paper to not rip until the timing spell - that he had woven with his Sapphire jewel - wore off on Christmas morning and shook his head in amusement. He may have become one of the Blood before the younger boy but Harry had taken to his newfound power and instincts far quicker than any he had ever seen.

"Siri?" His heart clenched in joy at the nickname his godson gave him. "Siri, you've known her longer, do you think Tonks will like this?"

Sirius looked over, eyes widening when they fell upon the amulet and chain that Harry was cradling so carefully. The bright copper shone from loving polishing and the delicate faerie was positioned in such a way that, even though its wings were as delicate as a butterfly's and even though its limbs were small and dainty, that no one could mistake the careful power and strength the little thing possessed. Sirius grinned at the sight of a tiny dagger strapped onto the figurine's leg and grinned. "I think she'll love it."

"Good." Harry looked down at the necklace in satisfaction. "Then I'll just finish it up and -" That made Sirius interrupt.

"WAIT!" Harry jumped and stared at him strangely. "You made that?"

"I did." Harry narrowed his eyes cursorily. "Why? Do you think I'm lying?"

"No!" To even suggest such a thing made Sirius balk. "I just want to know how."

"Oh." Harry smiled easily. "I bought the metal and then I spun a tangled web to hold all my memories of Tonks." So that meant that Harry had a purpose when he had asked Kirra where he could get nail-polish... "Then I used the Sapphire to mould the metal through the web and it made something that would represent Nymphadora Tonks. This is just what the end result is - I've put tons of protection spells on it..." His voice trailed off and he tried to put it away quickly but it was too late. Sirius has seen what he hadn't before and knew why his godson seemed suddenly so eager to hide it from view.

Shimmering on the butterfly wings was a tiny sliver of Harry's Sapphire. Sirius met Harry's challenging gaze and nodded - understanding all too well why his godson had done what he had. He was the only real family that Harry had and Tonks was Sirius's younger cousin and therefore Harry's as well. Harry had lost too much family for him to take any chances with the little that he had left. That one bit of jewel - with all the protective spells woven into its very core - had one purpose: to protect Nymphadora Tonks from harm.

"So Harry...do I get a clue about my present?" Harry snorted incredulously and then pointed to a bright red and gold wrapped present sitting amongst the pile of finished presents waiting to be delivered. Sirius dipped partially into his animagus form to heighten his senses but was dismayed to find only the lingering scent of a Warlord Prince who didn't want anyone to know the contents of the various packages. He huffed loudly and knew that Harry had seen his little dip and was perfectly aware of the reason behind his huff. "You're no fun."

"Oh, I'm plenty fun." the teen retorted, crossing his arms and pouting playfully. "Not for everyone else, mind you, but fun for myself."

"I'm telling Father Christmas that you've been naughty." Sirius teased and then laughed when Harry pulled a horrified look.

"Oh don't please! I don't think I could stand it if Father Christmas thought I'd been bad."

Sirius crossed his own arms and peered out of the corner of his eye at his godson. "Maybe if you give me a better clue..."

"Your ignorance amuses me." Harry deadpanned and rolled his eyes as he returned to his presents, ignoring his godfather who was making mocking faces behind his back.

Dumbledore eyed the instruments that monitored Harry's mental defences (a recent addition to his collection). A day or so ago they had been hardly moving; signalling that his defences were at next to nothing, but now they were whirling and clinking and whistling merrily as if his shields were in place once more but Albus knew this had to be impossible. If he'd had his shields shattered like Harry had, they wouldn't be up to an acceptable level for at least a week. Even with Kirra or anyone's help, the shields should have been next to decimated. Fawkes trilled in amusement and tilted his head, extending his long neck forward to chime an accompanying melody to a delicate little instrument that was responsible for indicating Harry's level of control over his shields - the phoenix had taken to entertaining himself with the Gryffindor's monitors and making cheerful little medleys that he would whistle to himself from time to time.

"Headmaster Dumbledore?" Argus Filch stood before the large desk, Mrs Norris faithfully riding on his shoulder and surveying the room with lamp-like eyes. She made a harsh hissing mewl at Fawkes who simply trilled in response, making the feline bare her fangs and nuzzle against her master's face. "Mrs Norris has been worrying about the Gryffindor rooms. She's very upset at Potter's early absence." The squib had never been one for word games or for beating around the bush. His uncanny ability to understand his cat (though the fact that she was Kindred might have helped) made

Albus turn from his instruments and study the man who was absently soothing his irate female.

"Unfortunately, Argus, Mr Potter was called away for rather urgent matters. I wonder why Mrs Norris is so upset at the absence of, admittedly, one of the worst children for trouble this school has ever seen?"

Filch looked at his cat and she mewed arrogantly, flicking her ratty tail and baring sharp fangs in a wide yawn. Filch returned his grey eyes to Albus's blue. "He may be a nasty troublemaker but he's got manners when it comes to animals. She's taken a bit of a liking to his presents and, apparently, the occasional point in the right direction of other troublemakers. She got some first year with dungbombs just two weeks ago from a tip off the boy."

That worried Albus. If there had been one thing (aside from his dislike - nay, hatred - of Severus Snape) that he could count on when it came to Harry it had been his dislike of getting anyone in trouble (Slytherins excepted from this rule, of course). To hear that he was giving tips to Mrs Norris and, ergo, Argus Filch, was disconcerting news. It meant that Albus Dumbledore wasn't as familiar with his Golden Boy as he had once been. But it was a necessary sacrifice.

He suspected that Voldemort had been possessing Harry through his scar, all summer long. This so-called 'vision' of Harry's was only being called such because that was what Harry believed they were. If that was what Harry wanted to believe then Albus wasn't about to stop him. It was going to be hard enough to convince him to agree with Albus' most recent plan as it was, without having the boy thinking that Voldemort was possessing him; distracting him from his task.

He really did love Harry, don't get him wrong. But sometimes he needed to love the Boy-Who-Lived portion of Harry more than Harry himself. The Boy-Who-Lived needed to be loyal only to Dumbledore and to the Order of the Phoenix; Harry needed to live his life the way he should have and the Sapphire jeweled Warlord Prince needed to serve and protect his females and his court at all costs - regardless of which side of the wizarding world's war was affected by his actions. Albus didn't enjoy manipulating a boy who was only just barely able

to be considered a teen but he didn't have the luxury of thinking about Harry's best interests - he had to think of the greater good before anything else.

Fawkes helped him quite a bit when it came to judging how far down the path of good intentions he was to an afterlife in hell; when he was on the right track, the phoenix would be in a good mood and would be willing to help him keep several of his best monitors running (the ones that ran on phoenix flame or phoenix magic were always so much better than his own motley collection); when he was on the wrong track...well you never quite appreciated a happy phoenix until you'd met an unhappy or angry one (Fawkes was fond of burning large portions of expensive equipment, himself).

"The holidays will be over soon; I wouldn't worry, Argus. Take Mrs Norris down to see Hagrid if you worry for her health." The caretaker scowled and left the room after bidding a curt goodnight to the headmaster. The Kindred feline on his shoulder hissed at Albus and continued to do so until the door was shut and she was blocked from view.

Dumbledore looked over at Fawkes. The phoenix shifted on his perch and then finally deemed Albus worthy of his attention. "I've had to renew and strengthen the compulsion spells because of Harry's more open discontent with the Order." Fawkes didn't make a noise but his eyes sharpened as he listened intently to his bonded human. "They grow eager for action and the Light isn't ready for that yet. Harry will be taking Occlumency lessons with Severus; hopefully he will both learn something and become upset enough that he will seek aid from myself or his friends - they are certainly loyal to my cause." Fawkes made a faint sound that might have been agreement at one point. "It is not right for our best weapon and soldier to abandon us so easily for a few kind words and impressive titles." Here Fawkes gave the avian equivalent of a disbelieving snort and trilled in such a tone that it made Albus wince. So perhaps those thoughts were not the best ones to voice to a temperamental phoenix who adored the green-eyed male but at least the magical bird hadn't disagreed with his plan completely; it couldn't be all that horrible.

Saetan smiled in appreciation at the thought of the Winsol dress (though Christmas was the appropriate term now that he was on

Earth) he had purchased for his granddaughter. It was very similar to the spidersilk one that Jaenelle used to wear for serious and important Court meetings when the entire First Circle was called down to Lorn's chamber. His granddaughter had followed full-heartedly in her mother's footsteps did not own very many dresses but he knew that she would adore the one she would receive.

His thoughts of his granddaughter inevitably led to thoughts about the Warlord Prince he had spent much of the summer tutoring. Harry had grown attached to him and Saetan was hard-pressed not to admit the same. Saetan thought about the carefully woven thread that the Weaver of Dreams had donated towards the young man's gift and shook his head in disbelief. The Weavers said that they had been waiting for a long time to put the particular web of dreams to use and that they couldn't think of anyone more deserving or more appropriate to give it too. They insisted that Saetan use it in his present to the green-eyed Warlord. That was why Saetan's gift to Harry had become a new setting for his Sapphire. The setting was rather plain but the protective spells and the tracking spell that was connected to the beautiful circlet Banard had made for Hedwig - one that the owl had already made abundantly clear they weren't getting back for any other reasons (Saetan had never felt so scolded in all his life) - so that Harry wouldn't have to worry so much about the safety of his bonded familiar.

He heard rather than saw his grandson 'discreetly' call in his own present to a certain young witch (who-shall-remain-nameless-upon-threat-of-blackmail - as everyone who knew about her had been told repeatedly) and check that it was still wrapped perfectly.

"You know," Saetan commented airily, startling the young man into hasty attention, "that the present hasn't changed the other hundred times you've checked and will never change all the two-hundred times you'll undoubtedly check."

Lucien looked sheepishly at his grandfather - a look that rarely graced his ferally beautiful features - and vanished the shimmering black and silver box from sight. "I know," he muttered, "but I had to go all the way to Egypt to fetch it without Kirra or mother finding out and then father found it and I had to threaten him with one of my best blackmail

secrets that I was planning on using to get him to keep mother busy for when I first bring Herm - " Lucien faltered and then continued on as if the slip-up had never occurred, "her to visit Kaeleer."

Saetan's lips twitched in the effort not to laugh. "Then please, check it all you like."

Lucien eyed him strangely. "Do I have to tell a certain lady Queen whom a certain High Lord happens to spend his nights with that he quite nearly told the shopkeeper who he was buying the most erotic -"

He never got to finish because his grandfather neatly shoved him out of the carriage and spiralling into the shimmer of the Red Wind they were riding. A long string of cursing echoed as the door shut with a sharp click. When they neared a turn in the Wind he smirked pointedly at the dishevelled youth before him as the door to the carriage open and shut a second time.

Lucien grunted. "Crystal clear, grandfather."

TBC...

Chapter#18

Harry watched as Ginny carefully applied the black tint to his nails. When she brushed against the one with the emerging snake-tooth, he winced at the sharp pain that ran all up his arm. She muttered an apology but continued on with her work. By all accounts he should have begun developing the snake-tooth a year earlier but, due to his years being malnourished at the Dursley's, it was only beginning to show now at age fifteen. When she had heard of his recent development, Kirra had sent him a book on the basics and a small brass movie sphere that showed Jaenelle teaching some of the simpler ways to weave a web as well as a bottle of black tint for his nails (it was higher quality than Muggle nail-polish and would last longer).

He glanced at the time and grinned. Hedwig would soon be returning from Gringotts (where she had informed him she felt the need for an owl to deliver something to him - all bonded-familiars knew when something that involved their bonded was going on) with whatever it was that required his attention. She had promised to be back at Grimmauld place no later than 7am (goblins rarely slept when there was money to be made).

Harry had, as was usual for him nowadays, risen very early to check dutifully on Ginny's potion. She had come knocking on his trunk only ten minutes later and demanded to be allowed to check herself. He had let her go by with a grin and waited for her to come back and announce that it would be ready by lunchtime. He still didn't know quite what it was but he was getting suspicious of the extra bounce in the red-head's step whenever he mentioned it.

"You know they'll be suspicious when you show up at their rooms already dressed." said Ginny vaguely.

Harry snorted softly. "They won't try anything and it'll be nice to open presents with..." he drifted off as though he didn't quite know how to describe who he meant.

"With your own family?" Ginny locked eyes with him as an expression of sleepy contentment floated to the surface.

"I've never had a real family before - not that I don't think of the Weasleys as a family it's just..."

"Not the same as having people who actually are related." She finished with a smile. "I understand, Harry; you don't need to explain yourself to me."

"Do you really think Sirius will like his present?" Green eyes shone as he stared down at the girl who was quickly becoming his closest confidant. It may have happened suddenly and it might not have made much sense for him to feel so strongly but it just fit, somehow, and he wasn't going to question his bout of good-fortune.

"Harry." She drew his attention to her with just a single stern voicing of his name. "Sirius would love whatever his present is simply because it came from you."

Despite all his training and every assurance he had ever received, Harry still faltered. The man was his godfather but he had only known Harry - Harry-as-a-wizard-and-capable-of-more-than-just-lying-in-a-cradle Harry - for a just over a year. The Dursleys had known him since he was a baby and had never appreciated anything he did for them (not that he expected much but they were the only parental figures he had for comparison) or, at least, mentioned their appreciation to him. Whenever he'd tried to help Ron or give his best friend gifts they had been rejected and with firm disgust as well. Dobby broke down crying and half took anything as an insult when Harry tried to help him. He never tried anything with his teachers because he figured they'd just prefer to see him as the innocent Golden-Boy Gryffindor who was also the Boy-Who-Lived and the saviour of the wizarding world; they would prefer he act as a child should instead of acting as though he was capable of helping them in any way, shape, or form.

"Harry Potter." Her voice was as sharp as steel as she narrowed angry brown eyes at him. He submitted to her anger quickly, ducking his head and lowering his gaze. "Don't even think that Sirius expects

some grandiose gesture of loyalty or that he won't like what you've chosen to give him. You being here is the best Christmas gift you could have given him - anything else is just an added bonus."

"You're right, of course." He muttered. He withdrew his hands (nails now dry and tinted a deep ebony) and inspected them carefully to avoid letting her see the sheepish look turning into a smirk as he continued to let her touch his arms - softly running her fingers up and down the exposed pale skin that still bore a slight tan from his summer outside.

"Naturally." She regarded him carefully for a moment longer before getting up. "Now, let's go see about hauling our presents downstairs without waking anyone."

It didn't take nearly so long to transport their presents down to a room that Sirius had worked especially hard to clean in order to put up the Christmas tree in a room with a fireplace. It only took a murmured word from Harry to make the logs Ginny dumped in the hearth to burst into flame and light up the room in a warm glow. Harry called the presents in by the loveseat nearest the fire and slumped down, shifting his feet out of the way so that Ginny could take a seat beside him.

He hoped that Ron would have some tact and notice that his best friend wasn't in their shared room; he hoped he would notice the note Harry had left by his pillow that said they were going to wait for everyone to come downstairs to open presents. Ginny had scrawled out copies and left them by each door after Harry had used his Sapphire to put all the presents out in the hall in the hopes that they would notice them better if they had to work to find them.

They sat in the room together for a half-hour in comfortable silence before a soft hoot sounded and the ghostly figure of Hedwig soared into the room. She whirled to examine the festive decorations she had missed before and then landed on the armrest of the loveseat. She cooed appreciatively when Harry called in her perch - a large ornate thing decorated with sculptured flowers and silver-leaf and with a large red Christmas bow perched right on top. She nuzzled against Harry's face at the sight of her Christmas present and then

hopped right up, making a delighted sound when she saw that he had taken the time to fill the attached water and food dishes.

"Only the best for the best owl in the world." Harry complimented with a wide grin as his familiar shifted in absolute delight, babbling on about how wonderful Harry was and most especially all the reasons she deserved such a magnificent gift. Ginny giggled and nodded her agreement when the owl turned searching golden eyes on her.

The parchment that Hedwig had delivered called Harry's attention, however, and he turned from his preening owl to examine the seal. It was the standard Gringotts seal but the parchment was thick and expensive so he knew this was another case of keeping the seal intact as he sliced it from the parchment with a wire-thin strand of Sapphire power. Ginny peered over his shoulder curiously and he did nothing to stop her - she had seen his other letter, after all. Mr Potter,

In regards to our previous meeting, a tutor has been arranged for you during the Easter Holidays. It shouldn't take long for a young wizard of your standing to grasp the concept of Apparition and to take his test. I would suggest (having been connected to the Potter family for long enough) that you make appropriate excuses to escape whatever previous engagements you might be dragged (not that I am suggesting you by any means do not enjoy spending time with whoever you do during holidays) to otherwise (Harry resolved to practise hiding his emotions better).

That said, Mr Potter, Gringotts would like to inform you that you have recently been sent a small sum of money from a 'Weasley Wizards Wheezes' as well as a messenger that informs us that you are being held as a partner in the company with control over 20 percent. We at Gringotts only mention this because of the...unusual deliverers of this message. In the future, please inform your business partners that we do not appreciate parrots being sent to dictate messages over and over...and over...again (Harry nearly choked, trying to keep his laughter down before he woke anyone; beside him, Ginny had stuffed her fist in her mouth to keep her own giggles down). I would like to breach the topic of hiring yourself a solicitor as the one the Potter Family is currently using (a certain headmaster of a certain magical school - not to name names) (Harry growled in annoyance) is rather

inappropriate. Gringotts would be able to help, if you so wish.
Gringotts

Manager Knotjaw

Magical Rights and Inheritance

Potter Trust VaultGinny managed to get herself under control rather quickly, brow furrowing in confusion before her eyes lit up in understanding. "Mrs SaDiablo!" She exclaimed, looking at him like that cat that had caught the canary. "That was who was at the Hog's Head during that meeting. She was taking you to Gringotts that day and that was when you requested a tutor for your Apparating license because of the Young Lord Heir Act..."

He looked at her oddly, never having heard something quite so...Pureblooded...coming from a member of the Weasley family. "How have you heard of that?"

"Blaise's mum can keep her last name because she was a sole heir and all of her husbands only gained status by taking her name instead of the other way around, but she gets divorced so often that Blaise has needed to take over the family as Head a few times during legal probation periods and the like so he's gotten his license early and they can't take it back after he's received it. There are some other factors as well but that's the one he lords over my head the most." Her lips quirked into an amused/annoyed smirk at the thought of one of her best friends. "There are a surprising number of old laws and decrees that I can take advantage of when I'm older - being Pureblood no matter how hard my family tries to deny it."

Harry felt something stir in approval at her cunning and realized it was the part of him that was a Warlord Prince. He chuckled to ease the tension that had suddenly appeared and gave a sigh of relief when she cuddled up against him and her female scent wafted to his nose. He calmed quickly and stared in utter contentment at the crackling fireplace.

By the time the clock on the mantle struck 7, Sirius stumbled into the room in simple drawstring pants and a t-shirt - all black. He stood in

the doorframe and stared at them, mouth open in a wide yawn that seemed to have frozen in time, and one hand poised by his eye to rub the remaining grit from the corners. Harry coughed quietly and his godfather shook out of his stupor, grinning widely and lunging forwards to give each of them a massive hug. Ginny giggled as she received her embrace and Harry chuckled when he found the reason for her amusement. Sirius was humming Christmas carols and his breath was puffing onto Harry's neck in time with the melody.

"Morning Siri." He murmured, hugging his godfather affectionately. Sirius's grey eyes sparkled with joy when he pulled back and Harry soon found himself being mauled by a very happy black dog. "Siri!"

His only response was a long tongue lolling out lazily before he was faced with his human godfather once more. "Happy Christmas, Harry! When are we going to open presents?"

Ginny snorted and Harry rolled his eyes. "Eager much?"

"Presents!" Nymphadora Tonks entered the room and tripped, sending her hovering pile of presents tumbling into a pile in front of the other occupants. She got up and grinned widely - bright red and green hair falling messily across her one gold and one silver eye. "So we ready to go?"

"Just waiting on Remus, apparently," Harry told her, looking at their small group.

"And the twins - they won't be so greedy as to stay upstairs." Ginny added

"Are you saying Hermione will?" Amused green eyes stared at her.

"No, but no one but us children-at-heart are going to be awake this early."

Sirius guffawed and, with a brief motion of his hand, used his Opal jewel to call in his own small pile of presents. Tonks was bouncing with excitement, eyeing the insane mishmash of colour that Harry had decided to use to wrap her present eagerly. Harry quietly sent a

message to Hedwig asking her to wake the twins and get them downstairs. She sent her affirmation along their link and, in only a few short minutes, twin red-heads Apparated into the room with a crack - each holding a medium sized sack of presents over their shoulders.

"Merry Christmas!" George - the more awake of the two - chirped cheerily as he dropped red and white santa hats on everyone's heads. He grinned at the sight of the eldest female. "Nice hair, Tonks."

"Very holiday spirited." Fred added after a wide yawn. "Definitely approve."

"What on earth are you all doing awake this early?" Remus Lupin was absolutely baffled at the sight of the adults and teenagers all surrounded by stacks of presents. He clutched a scrap of parchment in his hand as he used the other - gripping his wand - to supervise his floating gifts. "I saw the note..."

"Then hurry up, Remus!" Tonks demanded, still eyeing her presents hungrily. "I want to open these now!"

Fred and George nodded their agreement furiously and Sirius turned to his animagus form and sent the most sickeningly adorable puppy-eyes at his long-time friend. Harry chuckled and his eyes danced in mirth at the exasperated look Remus sent him as he settled in an armchair across from the loveseat. "Alright, alright, open!" He urged and everyone dove into their presents enthusiastically (Sirius and Tonks seemed to be having a contest with Fred and George over who could open the most presents the fastest). Ginny took her time about it - ripping the paper quickly but taking the time to read cards and to set hers aside carefully after taking the time to examine her gift.

Remus did much the same as Ginny but there was something about his eyes that spoke of not believing he deserved any of the few presents he had. Harry eyed him warily as he opened his own, feeding the fire with the wrapping and tissue paper as he opened each present.

Harry rolled his eyes at Hermione's gift - a homework planner that said silly little saying whenever he opened it; Sirius and Remus had

pitched in together to get him a book set entitled Practical Defensive Magic and its Use Against the Dark Arts - Harry grinned at the moving color illustrations, already thinking of its uses in the DA; he smacked the furry brown wallet Hagrid had gotten him scoldingly when it tried to bite him; Ron's was, predictably, sweets - Every-Flavour Beans; the Weasley parents sent him the usual jumper that he pulled over his head immediately and grinned cheekily at Ginny as she pulled her own on after much urging from her older brothers; Dobby's present was...unique. He tilted his head to the side and turned the thing upside down before consulting the group.

"What do you think it is?"

"Looks like a gibbon with two black eyes." Fred said, squinting oddly at it. George snorted and then couldn't stop laughing as he pointed at the back of the painting. Everyone stared at the one twin until they read what he was reading and began to laugh hysterically as well. Harry blushed furiously and rolled his eyes as he noticed the note from Dobby that said it was a painting of Harry. He quickly stuffed this under the couch and continued with his presents.

Tonks had got him a miniature working model of a Firebolt and he watched it zoom around the room with a slightly wistful expression. He'd missed being able to fly ever since he got banned from Quidditch and Umbridge had taken away his broom. He hadn't even reacted to Malfoy's taunts but when George had escaped his grip he had chased after the beater and that was all that Umbridge had needed to see to ban both Harry and the twins. Harry had always viewed flying and playing Quidditch as something that connected him to his father but separated him at the same time - James had been a chaser and hadn't been nearly as good a flyer as Harry was. Lily had been amazing at charms and only flew for class and never beyond that - as far as Harry knew - so the amazing skills he had could only have come from his own hard work.

"Thanks Nymph." He murmured, hugging his cousin tightly and burying his face into her neck. She didn't protest his new nickname for her and even returned his hug, grinning when he pulled back with one of his own.

"You're welcome little cousin." She murmured, kissing his cheek affectionately. "Thank you for the charm. It means a lot." He met her gaze and the gold and silver wavered to pale blue-grey, so much like Sirius, before they brightened to their festive colours once more; she knew just what that sliver of blue stone meant to Harry and appreciated his gift all the more for it.

Nymphadora - recently nicknamed Nymph by her technically non-blood related cousin - grinned when said cousin cuddled up beside her. Fey green eyes followed the progress of her gift to him around the room and she heard the soft rumble of contentment he was giving unintentionally as his arm tucked her smaller body close to his own. His chin rested on her shoulder and she laughed as he sang soft crude carols under his breath.

Sirius and Remus suddenly when quiet as together they opened a red and gold wrapped gift Harry had addressed to the two of them. She glanced over worriedly and then looked over at her little cousin, startled, when he suddenly withdrew and went silent as well. Her heart went out to him when she saw his carefully guarded face and she turned to face the two men - intent on cursing them six weeks from Tuesday for making her little cousin (who she saw as more of a little brother with each passing moment) upset.

"Harry..." Remus trailed off and his eyes glistened with suppressed tears as Sirius tackled his godson in a fierce embrace. She jumped out of the way - hair turning pitch black (her natural colour) for a split second before the festive ones returned and she narrowed her eyes upon the werewolf. Beside her, Sirius was mumbling frantically to a much amused and relieved godson and she couldn't make out the words.

"Well?" She demanded. He smiled sadly but held out the present reverently. She looked at it and then her hand flew to her mouth as a soft gasp of delight and recognition escaped her lips.

The picture was one of Sirius, Remus and Harry taken some time during the summer. In it, Harry was laughing and trying to wrestle off the black Grimm-like dog who bounded playfully around and on top of his godson. Remus was sitting on a chair and trying and failing to

hide laughter behind a plain white mug. Eventually, the two wrestling would grin at each other and tackle the other man and then all three would yelp and split apart as the hot liquid fell on them only to laugh hysterically once more. But this wasn't what had silenced the two men and the anxious young wizard; it was the frame.

Meticulously carved into the dark wood was a twisting and twining groove that ran without ending and had been filled with shining gold. She traced the figures of a wolf-like creature, a huge dog, a proud stag and a beautiful lily nestled in the corner with her eyes and smiled as she remembered stories of her elder cousin and his friends as well as Harry's mother. She had never met them personally (his parent's, she meant) but she knew that it had tortured both of the men when they had found out about their deaths. The gift from Harry honoured his past family and showed that, even though they had diminished, they were still his family.

Ginny caught Nymph's eyes and smiled faintly. The girl's eyes showed happiness for the males and she quietly motioned for Nymph to follow her to the kitchen. The red-head murmured an excuse about getting some drinks so that the three could get a hold on their emotions and compose themselves before the females returned. Nymph smiled softly at the scene and shut the door without any of her usual clumsiness.

Mother Night! Kirra had known that Earth was different from Kaeleer but she had never quite registered how different it was until now. She held her hands out and gently brushed against the huge glittering web and then shuddered at the onslaught of emotion before withdrawing. The female beside her looked bemused and sad all at the same time.

"Now, do you understand?"

Kirra hesitated at the question - reluctant to answer. She wanted to say she did but she knew that, really, she didn't and couldn't understand. She couldn't read the vibrations in that web; couldn't appreciate the beauty and the horror; couldn't hear the everything and the nothing the web could send her; couldn't bear the effort it would take to remain out of the Twisted Kingdom and still anchor and be anchored by this web. She looked to her companion and took a

careful step back; surrendering her ruling position as a Queen to this other blue-eyed Black Widow. The Black Widow's lips twisted in amusement and she reached out and embraced the web and all it had to offer. Kirra could only lower her eyes and accept the shame of being unfit to take her place as Witch of the Realm.

No, that title would forever belong to this witch. The true Witch of the Realm.

She felt the slow spiral of power and sighed as it washed over her - through her - and was slowly drawn into the centre of the spiral. She felt the brush of air, the coolness of water, the warmth of fire, the steadiness of earth and the whisper of spirit and allowed her own power to be drawn into the circle to follow along the spiral path to the centre.

As long as the dance was, as languid as the spiral of power swirled, it still seemed to be over all too quickly for either female. Kirra sighed heavily and held her palms out, staring at the drained Black sadly. She turned to look to her mother and saw the distinct lack of colour that meant that the Twilight's Dawn was drained as well. Jaenelle simply stared at the jewels before a plucking of power deep in the Abyss could be felt. The jewel in her hands sparkled back to life and the haunting ancient eyes returned to a sunny sky-blue as her lips curled in a faint smile.

Kirra knew that her mother hated to rely on that link to her former dark glory but she also knew that if the Twilight's Dawn was ever truly drained that her mother would not be able to live on. The woman who was dreams made flesh needed to be connected to the Abyss and to the surrounding Darkness. She needed the Misty Place and the clarity that allowed her to see the Twisted Kingdom as just another point of view. Without those...she wasn't Witch and she would not exist - no matter how strongly the Kindred tried to hold her to the flesh, dreams would become dreams once more.

Kirra herself had sworn never to be so foolish as her mother was. But the truth was - Kirra was unable to be as foolish as Jaenelle had been. Jaenelle had ignored her own wants to save the Kindred and had made her Offering. Kirra couldn't make her Offering. There was

nothing she had that she could Offer. The Black was all that she had, all that she was, all that she would ever be.

There it was. The truth about wicked, darling Kirra. Kirra was a form of Witch - a form that should not have ever been born to flesh. Kirra was the desperate wish and dream that Jaenelle would take back her former glory. She hadn't been born to Jaenelle - not truly - but Jaenelle was her mama. Her mother - her real, honest-to-Darkness, birth-mother - was Karla. The Grey-Jeweled Glacian Queen who was also a Black Widow and a Healer. Her mother who now ruled over the females in Hell and who kept the Hell Hounds healthy and fat with the flesh of those who were not true to what it meant to be Blood - to those who had survived the Purge that should have destroyed them. Her mother who had become pregnant without the aid of a male; her mother who had died giving birth to the twisted, twisted, twisted dream that was Kirra.

But, although Kirra's Birthright was the Black, that was all she could bear. The Tri-Realms (Hell, Kaeleer, and Terreille) could not support another Witch - the Abyss would not give up that kind of power ever again, no matter how strong the dreamers; not after it had already given its power to a vessel and had that vessel broken and then stolen back when it had tried to embrace its daughter. The Abyss had granted her the strongest Jewel it had and that was all it would grant her. She could - if she really tried - visit the Abyss but only just barely and only when it wanted her to weave a specific Tangled Web with a specific message for its lovely daughter - Jaenelle. Kirra was simply its messenger.

Therefore, if Kirra ever were to completely drain her Black, she would fade away and become a lost dream in the Darkness. Her mother - Witch - who had donated a fraction of the anchor thread that kept her connected to the Abyss - would be the only one who would remember that she had ever existed. Then, when Kirra died of natural causes, the same would happen. She was doomed to die and be forgotten - to fade away completely, leaving no trace of her behind. She was a Queen and a Black Widow and, although her connection with the earth and with the Realms was strong, she was barren. No matter the potion no matter the man, she would bear no children. Like from her grandfather's past, she was doomed to become a living breathing

Zuulaman. Only it would be worse for her. She would vanish and nothing would remain; not a memory, not a register, not a book, simply...nothing.

She would be the Blood's blessing and curse. She would wake a Realm and then she would sleep.

Sleep.

Sleep...

Neville hesitated by his mother's bed, staring at the woman whom he had wanted desperately to have in his life ever since he could remember.

Alice Longbottom had never been beautiful. She had always been just a little too plump and her face a little too round to be beautiful but she had always been pretty. Her cheerful smile and sunny blonde hair and bright blue eyes had always sparkled with life. Neville still had pictures at his home of his mother - of his mother laughing, cooking (with a dusting of batter on one cheek as baby Neville played in his high-chair), working... Neville could remember a picture of her from after she had graduated the Auror Academy; she had worn the standard blue-black uniform with the badge on her front that proclaimed her a fully-fledged Auror. Her normally smiling face had been serious but with a twinkle in her eye that spoke of her playfulness and love of life even when she was dressed for hunting criminals.

Now, however, her previously plump and happy face had become sunken and pale and entirely too dark around her too-large eyes. Her hair looked dead and had paled to a bone-white that always disturbed Neville when he saw it. His eyes saddened as he stared at the remains of his mother and he held back the tears that he hadn't shed since he had first visited them as a child.

Across the small curtained off corner was his grandmother, Augusta Longbottom, was watching her grandson stare at his mother sadly and longingly. She glanced at her son and withheld the sigh and the sting of tears that always accompanied seeing her darling only son.

Neville turned from his mother and went to his father's bedside. Frank Longbottom had been classically handsome before the attack. He'd had a strong jaw-line and dark hair and serious dark eyes. He'd had a leaner look than his wife but had been strong with a beater's muscular upper-body. Neville had taken his father's hair and the potential to have a similar build but he'd adopted his mother's softer features and a hazel color of eyes with just a touch more blue to make them greenish than his father's dark ones.

"Neville!"

He winced heavily as they were leaving the ward, recognising the voice who had called his name. He wanted so much to simply disappear and not have to face his 'friends' and their questions. He looked over and met Harry's eyes over Ron's mess of red hair. The other teen looked sympathetically at him but Neville knew it wasn't because of who he'd been visiting; it was because of Ron preparing to poke his nose into matters where it didn't belong. Neville knew that Harry knew about his parents and he'd known it since around the time he figured Harry first found out. They'd touched the subject of the younger male's knowledge once during this school year and had never mentioned it again - both boys knew that there were some things that they'd rather keep to themselves. Neville was grateful that Harry had attempted to keep his friends from realizing who Neville was visiting (he'd seen the string grip that Harry had kept on Ron as he'd been attempting to steer them out of the ward just as Neville rounded the corner of the curtained off corner.

"Ron." He nodded to the other boy and tried not to let his grandmother take over the conversation. "Harry, Ginny, Hermione, this is my grandmother. Grandmother, this is Ron, Harry, Ginny and Hermione." He pointed to each of them in turn and then swiftly changed his hand so that it was more of a sweeping gesture to each instead of the rather rude finger-point that she had frowned deeply at.

"Yes...yes. Neville's told me about you." She fixed Hermione with an approving look. "Helped him out of a few sticky spots, haven't you? He's a good boy," she gave Neville her sternly appraising look and Neville rolled his eyes at Harry and Ginny (who chuckled and giggled, respectively) when she turned back to the group, "but he hasn't got

his father's talent, I'm afraid to say." She jerked her head in the direction of Frank and Alice and Neville's eyes hardened. He hated it when Augusta bragged, of all things, about what had happened to her son and daughter-in-law.

"What?" Harry looked at Ron as though he wanted nothing more than to stamp on his foot or trip him or something equally embarrassing and ridiculous. "Is that your dad down the end, Neville?" Harry brought his hand up to take off his glasses and massage the line between his eyes in exasperation.

"What's this?" He glanced over quickly at his grandmother's sharp voice. "Haven't you told your friends about your parents, Neville?"

"Harry knows." He answered evasively. "And so does Ginny and I've told Blaise." Augusta Longbottom looked displeased with the shortness of his list.

"My son," she began haughtily, for the benefit of the only two of the group who didn't know, "and his wife were tortured to insanity by You-Know-Who's followers."

Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth while Ginny - who stood beside her - stared straight ahead with a clenched jaw. Ron stopped craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Frank Longbottom (Neville was rather glad for this too, as he and Harry, too, it seemed, felt as though they would punch the male at any second if he continued to act so rudely) and looked mortified at the news.

Neville glanced nervously at Harry as his grandmother continued to speak, feeling his Affinity crying that a danger was nearby - the same danger that it always screamed about when Harry got upset.

"They were Aurors, you know, and very well respected within the wizarding community." She continued to brag and Harry felt the coolness of his power rise up and try and swallow him. He knew that, logically, he shouldn't be upset at the bragging as it was simply Augusta's way of dealing with the loss of her only son - which was even worse in her case because she still had her son - but his instincts could only make out the sorrow in the psychic scent that permeated the ward and that this female was making that sorrow

worse. He clenched his jaw and slipped the stiletto (that he had never stopped wearing, ever since Daemon had given it to him) down to slice his palm and let the blood flow. Ginny glanced over sharply at his intake of breath and her eyes widened fractionally at the flash of crimson she managed to glimpse before he sealed the wound and vanished the blood with his Sapphire.

Augusta was still speaking but Ginny had turned her attention away. "Harry?" She murmured. On her shoulder, Baron shuffled warily and eyed the human who suddenly smelled of blood. His head cocked to one side, memorizing the words that were being spoken and understanding them vaguely.

"Let's get out of here." He muttered, shooting Neville an apologetic look as he accepted the bubble gum wrapper from his mother and left with his gran. "I don't think I can stay here much longer without..." he abruptly stopped and refused to speak further.

Ginny didn't need to know about what he was capable of. She didn't need to know that her new friend had taken lessons - well, lesson - in torture and bloodshed and maiming and killing. She didn't need to know that Daemon had trapped him in a Tangled Web that forced Harry to live through Daemon's memories of his horrific acts of violence, nearly 1700 years worth, as if he had been the one to do them. After that horror he'd done the opposite and lived through the torture as if he'd been being tortured.

But that wasn't even the worst of the final session he'd had with Daemon. His eyes clouded over at the very thought and he turned away from his friends, jaw clenched and fists curled. "Yes, I knew about his parents. No, I would never have told you. Now, I'm leaving and that's the end of it."

And it was. No one questioned him as he left the ward - not even Lockhart who watched him go with surprisingly wary and fearful eyes instead of his usually blank cheerful ones. Ginny glanced between Harry and then the rest of the Golden Trio before she darted after the Warlord Prince with an anxious Baron flying after her just above her shoulder.

TBC...

Chapter #19

Harry's eyes blinked open, confusion shining in them as he took in Mrs Weasley's face hovering above his. "I'm sorry." He murmured automatically. "I was...thinking." It wouldn't do him any good to have Mrs Weasley worrying over the state of his mental health. He was already having enough trouble learning how to build mental defences from scratch and it would be even more difficult for him to continue with the foundations he had just managed to get down if he had to fight with his Warlord Prince instincts.

"Hm." She looked down on him with a soft frown. "Professor Snape would like a word with you. He's in the kitchen." She added.

"Oh." Harry's brow furrowed. What on earth could his potions master need during the holidays? "Do you know what the reason for his visit is?"

"I'm afraid not dear." She motioned he hurry up and he stood warily. "Come along, quickly, he says he can't stay long."

"Yes lady." He murmured, watching the Weasley matriarch flush a little at the title. Harry turned his senses to the annoyed presence down in the kitchen and then reached out for his familiar. Hedwig swooped in the room and alighted to his shoulder, ruffling her feathers indignantly as a very hyper Pigwidgeon came zooming in.

"I'll come with you." she volunteered shortly. Her golden eyes were narrowed irritably upon the smaller owl. She hooted sharply and flapped one wing to smack him in the back of the head. "Go!"

"Yes mum." He murmured, laughing when the snowy owl fixed him with a stunned but absolutely delighted look. She nuzzled against his head, cooing softly and preening with pride all the way down to the basement kitchen.

Harry raised a brow the moment he walked into the room. Sirius and Snape were having a staring match over an open letter that lay spread across the table. Hedwig flapped over, turning her head

nearly upside-down to peer at the contents curiously. "Looks like Snape will be teaching you...something. I don't know what it is." Hedwig informed flapped back to her previous perch and nuzzled him affectionately again - still high with pleasure from his previous comment.

"Professor." Harry greeted, waiting for the man to turn his attention away from his still glaring godfather.

"Potter. Sit down." Severus Snape returned shortly. It wasn't the most polite of phrasing but it was considerably polite considering that he was speaking to Harry.

"You know, I'd think I'd prefer it if you didn't give orders here, Snape." Sirius was speaking to the ceiling as he leaned back on the hind legs of his chair. The tenseness in the room was entirely his fault, Harry knew, as Snape would have been perfectly short but still rational had the ex-convict not been there. "Seeing as it's my house."

"Sirius." Harry warned quietly and then turned to his potions professor. "Please, sir, continue." He had taken a seat opposite the man and was ignoring his godfathers incredulous stare.

"Hn." Snape narrowed his eyes but continued to speak in the same just-brushing-civil tone. "The Headmaster has ordained it that you will be learning Occlumency this term."

"Oh?" Harry straightened, curious now that he knew the subject of this visit. "Is this because of Kirra's shields failing during the night of Mr Weasley's attack? Or was it because of my vision?"

"I do not know nor do I care, Potter." Snape snapped. "You will take private lessons once a week and you will not tell a soul, least of all Dolores Umbridge. Do you understand?"

"Crystal, sir." Harry peered at the annoyance in his teacher's eyes curiously and then voiced a question. "Who will be teaching me?"

"I will." Snape's lips curled into a twisted smirk as Sirius spluttered indignantly.

" Really?" Harry was definitely interested now. "You're a master then? I had read that less than a hundred wizards have ever reached the level of master. That is quite an accomplishment for your years, sir." He saw the sneer and then hastily tried to rectify his easily misinterpreted words. "I mean that with the utmost respect."

"I am convinced." Snape drawled. "Six o'clock on Monday evening, Potter. My office. If anyone asks... you are taking remedial potions."

"Sir, with all respect, that is hardly a suitable excuse if we consider my improvement in your subject. Would it be possible for me to instead say that I am to do some of the menial tasks that you cannot be bothered with?"

Snape's eyes narrowed at the hint of impudence but Harry stood his ground silently. "As much as it pains me to say this, Potter, yes, you may use that as an excuse instead." The man got to his feet and turned to leave. Harry nodded at his turned back and left the room with Hedwig, leaving a bewildered Sirius Black behind.

He was forced to retreat a few steps when the door swung open and he was faced with a beaming Arthur Weasley. "Cured! Completely cured!"

Harry smiled at the red-haired man. Arthur Weasley had always been kind to him and he liked the way that, despite his love for muggles and all other things that Pureblood society generally disliked, still kept up-to-date with Pureblood traditions - even if his family didn't celebrate them.

"That's great Mr Weasley." Harry smiled at him to cover up the bewilderment and upset radiating from his godfather.

"Yes, isn't it?" Mrs Weasley beamed, leading her husband towards a chair. "Healer Smethwyck worked his magic in the end, found an antidote to whatever that snake's got in its fangs, and Arthur's learned his lesson about dabbling in Muggle medicine, haven't you, dear?" She added this last menacingly as she glared at him from the corner of her eye. Harry smirked internally but didn't say a word in the

man's defence. As far as he and his instincts were concerned, Mr Weasley deserved to be reprimanded by the hearth witch for causing her to lose control of her household for even a second.

"Yes, Molly, dear." Mr Weasley shrunk into his seat and smiled weakly at his wife who huffed and nodded in satisfaction before turning to her kitchen to prepare a welcome back feast. Harry waited until she was fully occupied until he turned to Mr Weasley.

"So, you wouldn't happen to have a record of what poison was used and the antidote for it...?"

Mr Weasley grinned and pulled out a stack of crisp parchment and began to explain. Hedwig looked positively delighted at this turn of events (she was always happy when Harry got any information that could protect him in the future) and it wasn't until Mrs Weasley shooed them out of the kitchen to wash up for supper that she was satisfied that she had understood everything.

Ginny smiled as she pulled on the beautifully knit sweater made of a mix spidersilk and cashmere that Kirra had given her for Winsol - the young witch's version of Christmas or Midwinter. It was a lovely steel-blue and the neckline dipped just low enough to reveal some cleavage while still remaining decent. Since Ginny wasn't all that large in the bust to begin with, there was a bit of gathering at the point of the v-shaped neckline and a line of black silk that ran just beneath the bust and all the way around the back. The wide poet sleeves gathered slightly at the cuffs and it was made to be water repellent. Ginny loved it and was wearing it on the day they were due to head back to school. Baron was perched on her shoulder (where Kirra informed her she had put numerous charms to clean up itself if Baron happened to have an 'accident') and they were waiting patiently for everyone to get ready to leave.

Harry was dressed in old army-green cargos and a black shirt with a muggle band logo advertised on the front with his long black trench-coat. Winter boots on his feet were waterproof and made dull thunks whenever he walked. The Sapphire around his neck glinted in the faint light and the one on his ring went round in circles as he spun the silvery band. His black hair seemed to have grown and it didn't stick

up quite as much anymore. But longer strands seemed to fall into his face more and he was constantly tossing his head to get rid of the annoyance.

Ginny flung out an arm when Harry went to walk past her again and caught a leather-gloved hand and stopped him. He looked at her curiously and she rolled her eyes. "You're making us dizzy." She informed him curtly, motioning to Baron and Hedwig - both of whom were glaring at the young Warlord Prince.

"Sorry." He tipped his head and smiled apologetically. "I just don't think I really want to go back."

"Oh?" Ginny raised an eyebrow in slight surprise. "Why is this?"

"I'm taking Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape." He murmured. The tone of his voice said that he hadn't told anyone else yet and Ginny filed away the information with the rest of all the secrets he had told her that she wouldn't share with anyone else. "I'm worried that he'll tear into some...less than pleasant...memories that I don't want to see and that I don't want him to see."

"I might be able to mention that to him. He certainly doesn't hate me." Harry looked uncomfortable so she changed the subject abruptly. "Would you like to know what potion I've made for the two of us?"

"You'll actually tell me?" He looked excited but sceptical. She rolled her eyes.

"Well, you look so sad and depressed that you've managed to worm it out of me. You're ruining the climactic revealing I had planned though..." she narrowed her eyes playfully at him and he simply grinned in response. "I suppose it's worth it. So...ever heard of the Animagus Revelio potion?"

Harry visibly perked up at that and Ginny smirked. "The one that shows you your animagus form?"

Ginny nodded and Harry whistled lowly, obviously impressed. She supposed he was thinking of all the time she had spent in isolation

while working on the potion and then of all the things that could have gone wrong since she was by no means a potions master (the only ones truly capable of making the potion properly). She met his gaze and then reached into the pocket of her brown thigh-length coat. She held out the vial of translucent liquid with the silvery wisps that formed the vague shapes of animals every now and then. He eyed it eagerly and his eyes darkened as he calculated all the pros and cons of being an unregistered animagus (because she was certain that he wouldn't register and she had no intention of doing so).

"We can take it our first night back in your trunk - the duelling room. It has enough space that the initial transformation..." (the one that the potion forced you to complete for a few minutes to get used to the feel of the new body - after that it took practice to get a full transformation again) she was interrupted by a hesitant look from the male in front of her. She peered at him with a faint frown and then realized what his train of thought must have been. "Unless of course the creature is dangerous. That would pose a problem. The Room of Requirement, then." He grinned at her and she found herself on the receiving end of one of Harry's few and far between hugs. His arms wrapped around her tightly and she was startled to hear the quickness of his breaths. It occurred to her that hardly anyone gave him things simply because they wanted to and not because they felt obligated to or because he was the boy-who-lived. She hugged him in return and waited patiently for him to withdraw and tuck the vial away while blushing slightly at his impulsive move.

"Sorry." He murmured.

"Hey," she waited until she caught sight of brilliant green eyes and then smiled reassuringly, "you're one of my best friends - oh don't look at me like that, it's true and you know it - and I certainly don't mind getting hugs. Especially since you don't try and strangle my while pumping for information about boyfriends." Harry smirked and she punched him in the shoulder. "Oh shut it."

"Didn't say anything." He sang and then laughed - a rich sound that hinted at the man he was becoming. Hedwig gazed at her bonded affectionately and Baron glared, not trusting the reason for the male's

delight, while Ginny just watched her friend be happy simply for the sake of being happy.

Slowly, the other tired occupants of the house began to trickle into the front hall. Ginny sighed heavily when she saw the growing crowd around the pile of coats and scarves and mittens and prepared to get up and shove her way through. A hand on her shoulder stopped her and she smiled thankfully at Harry as he held out her hand-knitted purple scarf. She quickly tucked it around her neck and stuffed the long trailing end into her front pocket so that Baron (who was cozing up inside the tiny space) would be kept warm as well. The jobberknoll flapped his tiny wings several times before fully settling and Harry watched in amusement with his own snowy owl familiar perched on his shoulder.

Tonks - who was sporting iron-grey hair and was considerably taller than usual - grouched at the horrid tweed robes she was forced to wear and Ginny sent her a knowing and apologetic grin. She understood very well that Tonks - who wanted nothing more than to be seen as who she was - hated having to change into something that did not suit her personality in the least. The red-haired youngest Weasley caught sight of a coppery chain and smirked as the Auror hastily hid the faerie necklace beneath her clothing.

They - eventually - all stumbled outside into the cold, grey, January morning and Ginny huddled up beside Harry, who looked comfortably warm in his long black coat with its high collar, even if his cheeks and nose were looking rather pink from the blasting wind. Hedwig had flatly refused to be coaxed into her cage by anyone and had also stuck her beak up at the suggestion she fly to the school. So, it had been decided that the large owl would be riding along with her human - and that no amount of threats from anyone were going to get her to move.

Remus flung out his right arm, grasping his wand, quickly. A loud BANG and a violent purple bus exploded into the air, screeching to a halt just before them. Baron threw a fit in her pocket and she hissed at him to calm down. The jobberknoll subsided but threw nasty looks at the triple-decker bus as they approached it. Hedwig twisted her head nearly all the way around and looked in amusement at the

panicking little bird and Ginny shared her amusement. Harry was oblivious to the goings on of his familiar and was shooting dark looks at the windows of the Night Bus.

The pimple-faced youth eyed the young Potter curiously at first, as Tonks ushered them all onboard while shooting furtive looks around the street, and then his eyes went wide as saucers. "Ere - it's 'Arry -!"

"If you shout his name I will curse you into oblivion!" Tonks snarled, eyeing the male as though daring her to doubt the sincerity of her words. Remus glanced over in surprise at the ferocity in her words. Ginny looked between the two and stored away the slight longing in her former Professor's gaze for future examination.

"Gin," she turned and followed the gentle tug from Harry as he shoved to the back of the bus, "this way." Tonks looked anxiously after the two of them and ordered a few things to the others before chasing after them. Ron and Hermione looked distinctly upset and confused while Fred and George grinned wickedly and split up, one of them (Ginny saw the small scar near the temple that meant it was Fred - she had given it to him one time when he had stolen her favourite doll) came to the back and settled into a seat beside them.

"Fred." Harry greeted evenly, before Ginny could even open her mouth. "Nice of you to split from George just to keep the lovers together." Ginny smirked and braced for the impact of their three adjacent chairs slamming into the opposite side of the bus as they sped off at breakneck speed.

"Ah, but of course my good sir," Fred wagged his eyebrows mischievously, "we wouldn't want little Ronikins to feel left out in the love department."

Ginny snorted. Hedwig hooted in disbelief and then in anger when they were sent crashing into the side of the bus again. "I hate this bus!" She snarled.

"I rather liked it, personally." Tom piped up unhelpfully. "Then again, that was because they didn't care who you were so long as you had a wand..."

"World domination is hard to plan from an orphanage, I know." Ginny drawled back. The little bit of consciousness groused unhappily at the comment. Tom had been being quiet all holiday - almost as if remorseful for what its future self ended up doing to its current host - and had only even emerged from its private little section to peer curiously out through her eyes before retreating. She didn't really mind having Tom in her head (not after nearly three years to grow accustomed to having him be there) just so long as he didn't try to take over her body.

He couldn't do much - just maybe one limb for a few seconds (and if anyone doubted her ability to gauge his talents they could go jump off a cliff - her mind was hers for a reason: no one else knew it better) - but when he did do something it always made both of them feel awkward and cold. Which shouldn't have been possible for someone trapped inside her head but still was the only way to describe such an ordeal.

Besides, Tom was dead useful sometimes. He helped her to study and he could keep most nightmares away if he set his, er, mind to it (don't even bother to correct her, it was the only way she could stay sane) and he was highly knowledgeable about the various snakes (many of whom she was friends with) that lived near the Burrow. Some of them had minor magical abilities and they'd - since she couldn't go anywhere without him - even once found a Runespoor who'd kindly consented to give them a bit of venom from each head (although the Critic had put up quite an argument and the entire thing had ended up dying right after the other two heads had bullied it into sharing willingly - albeit under protest).

"Wake up." Tom announced, drawing her from her thoughts. "We're here and wonder-boy," he winced at the terrible mental shove she gave him, "Harry, is waiting for you."

"Sorry." She murmured, accepting the offered hand that was patiently waiting for her. Harry smiled knowingly and tilted his head to one side, adorably accepting of her moment of lost thoughts. "Thinking."

"It's perfectly fine. I suppose the two of us have rather more in our heads to ponder than others." There were times when she was astounded what a few weeks formal Court training could do to a teenaged boy's speech but she figured it was simply Harry being who and what he was. She wouldn't want him to attempt to lower himself to the dim-witted level of his peers simply because he was different from them. She grinned a little ruefully at his comment.

"You have no idea." She drawled dryly.

Harry laughed.

"Neville?" Blaise Zabini voice the soft question, watching his sometimes lover jump and whirl around abruptly. The dark-haired male narrowed his eyes dangerously at the sight of the other male's appearance that, previously, had been shrouded in shadows.

Neville was unhealthily pale - something that should have been impossible considering the amount of time that he spent in the greenhouses with his plants - and his hair lay lank and greasy against his head. His skin was covered in a faint sheen of sweat and his limbs were trembling. Hazel eyes were darting all over and Blaise took a careful step forward. Neville flinched and stepped back, causing the table behind him to rattle and all the plants to shake. It was this more than anything that made Blaise worried. Neville would never do anything that could potentially harm plants.

"Neville..." The Slytherin softened his features and crooned gently, "Shh...Neville, come here." The last was said in a stern voice that Neville responded to almost instantly. It made Blaise angrier that the other male didn't put up a fight but he wrapped his arms around him quietly and murmured nonsensical reassurances as the Gryffindor trembled and clutched at his robes.

Blaise sighed lowly and opened his mental shields, reaching out with his Empathy (he was an Empath - as were all the Zabinis) and embracing Neville with warm and soothing feelings. This enabled him to move the two of them into the castle and into the room that Professor Sprout used only occasionally when they needed to take a note down. It had a door that opened to the outside and it wasn't very far away so soon Neville and Blaise were curled up together in the

corner of the darkened room with one of Blaise's special blood-locks on the door (a borderline illegal trick that his mother had taught him after a bad round with one of her husbands - he'd died a very painful death, if the screams from the dungeon were indication enough).

"Tell me what's wrong." The Zabini ordered. Neville shuddered violently and Blaise tightened his hold, pulling the smaller boy almost all the way into his lap. "Tell me."

"Gran kept me in nearly all hols." Came the raspy voice. "Well, not Gran - she was too occupied with all those awful dinner parties and engagements I used to have to go to - but my Uncle..."

"What did he do?" Neville jumped at the violence dripping from Blaise's question. The Slytherin had been staring ahead blankly, trying very hard not to let his own emotions taint the warm blanket of nice ones he had laid down on the shaking boy. He looked down when an answer was slow in the coming and waited patiently.

"It wasn't...well, it was...but he didn't mean -!"

"Neville." Blaise interrupted the stammering.

The Longbottom heir swallowed. "He kept me in and tried to train me like he used to do with my father. Except...I wasn't very good."

"And...?"

"And so he wouldn't let me out to see the plants. This is the first time I've been near them all week..."

Blaise felt his insides freeze. His empathy lashed out against the firm hold he'd kept on it and he turned his eyes heavenwards murmuring in a soft voice one of the various old Gaelic phrases his mother had taught him to focus his power and draw it within himself (something she had also said he shouldn't do unless he felt himself going cold - which meant his magic might react to the overload of intent and something bad could happen). Once he'd sufficiently drawn in some of his power - just enough that nothing would explode - he started up on a string of curses. He narrowed his eyes and started one of the

many prayers to Morrigan - and old Irish goddess of war - to whom he'd been dedicated to (as was the custom of the Zabini family - for each child to be given a patron god or goddess). Morrigan was one of a triad and represented the crone - wisdom, repose, death, and endings. Her sisters - or maybe they were simply other aspects of herself - Badb and Macha represented the maiden and the mother. Morrigan took the form of a hooded crow, Macha as a cow, and Badb as a raven. The previously warm blanket of emotions turned icy but Blaise was intent on the prayers to his triad and took no notice of his friend's discomfort.

"Blaise!" Was that Neville? "Blaise, stop it!"

Blaise turned his eyes down upon the male and watched in silent horror as Neville shuddered. He frowned - unable to show much more emotion as he struggled against the tidal wave of his own emotions - and then blanked his face, running his hands up and down the Gryffindor's arms to generate more heat. "Are you cold?"

"Yeah." Neville sighed and buried his nose into the crook of Blaise's neck, inhaling there shakily. Blaise tilted his head to peer curiously at him from the corner of his eye (he was completely unaware of how terrifying he was when he went cold). "Yeah...cold."

"What did he do?" Neville jumped at the violence dripping from Blaise's question. The hazel eyes turned upwards and took in the hard lines and harsh angles of the Slytherin's normally classically handsome face. Dark eyes switched from glaring straight ahead to gazing softly down to the boy in his lap, clearly awaiting an answer.

"It wasn't...well, it was...but he didn't mean -!"

"Neville."

The Longbottom heir swallowed. "He kept me in and tried to train me like he used to do with my father. Except...I wasn't very good."

"And...?"

"And so he wouldn't let me out to see the plants. This is the first time I've been near them all week..."

Every deliciously wonderful muscle, that Neville normally loved to have wrapped around him, stiffened as Blaise slowly turned frozen eyes upwards. A low string of curses started and Neville's eyes widened at the creativity and the number of gods and goddesses of vengeance that the Zabini heir was calling on. He thought he'd even heard the Morrigan in there (and when Blaise called on his patron goddess, you knew he was furious). The previously warm blanket of emotions turned into a fathomless void of fury and anger and it threatened to swallow up what little warmth the Longbottom had managed to gather.

"Blaise!" Neville clutched at his robes and shook the boy by the shoulders. "Blaise, stop it!"

The frozen eyes turned towards him and Neville felt himself shudder involuntarily. Blaise was terrifying when he was angry. The older boy frowned and suddenly was calm and collected again, running his hands up and down the Gryffindor's arms to generate more heat. "Are you cold?"

"Yeah." Neville sighed and buried his nose into the crook of Blaise's neck, inhaling the spicy scent there. "Yeah...cold." Anything to keep Blaise off the warpath because nothing, and I mean nothing, could stop a raging Zabini.

He stayed in the older male's arms for a while longer and relishing in the soothing emotions that Blaise was spinning into a cocoon around him. It was making his crying Affinity quiet down, as if it realized that its vessel could do no good if he was shaking like a leaf and unable to focus its power. Eventually he calmed enough to peek at Blaise's watch and then jumped up with a horrified look.

"Ginny!" He exclaimed. Blaise shook his head in confusion and then the dark eyes widened as realization set in.

"She's finished the potion by now." He stated. "She'll give a dose to Potter..."

"And she's saving the rest of it for us!" Neville was especially excited for this. An animagus form could potentially well, ground, his Affinity for the earth and allow him actual control over his instincts. Neville knew Blaise was eager because it meant that he could throw his Empathy out to its fullest and not have to live with the silent strain of keeping up his mental walls (which was incredibly unhealthy for an Empath - considering they lived for emotions).

"Then we should get going." Blaise stood and offered his arm to Neville. The Gryffindor raised a brow and Blaise glanced down in annoyed amusement. "I hate winter ball tours."

Neville laughed.

TBC...

You know i'm desperate for reviews when i write down here. Please don't make me suffer...

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Chapter#20

Hermione sat silently in the kitchen, watching Harry as he sat in deep conversation with Nymphadora Tonks. The two of them were sitting rather close and Harry's arm lay draped along the back of Tonks' chair. She didn't seem to mind and was smiling cheekily at the teen as he smirked, tossing glances around the bustle of Christmas morning breakfast every once in a while, and replied back to her.

She'd been planning on opening presents with Harry and Ron later on that morning and had been utterly dismayed to find out that Harry had been awake well before seven o'clock in the morning and had opened his presents in the company of Ginny, the Twins, Tonks, Remus Lupin and his Godfather. She knew something important had happened during that time and whatever it was it had made Harry act very unlike Harry.

Her eyes narrowed faintly without her permission as he leaned down to murmur something to Tonks that had the woman blushing hotly and her bright red and green hair flash pink for a moment before settling back to its festive colours once more. His resulting laugh was rich and deep and something of the like that Hermione had never before heard from her friend. It made her unnaturally jealous.

The best way to describe Harry's new behaviour was...male. Not male after the fashion of teenage boys but male after the fashion of Lucien with a hint of Daemonar. He was wearing clothes that actually fit him - black pants and leather boots, a dark green shirt that brought out the colour of his eyes and a borderline-black green jacket that was styled with a high collar and silver trim and left open - and was obviously very expensive. The Harry she had grown up with was very conscious of how much money he actually had and never bought something as frivolous as expensive clothing; this Harry had not only bought expensive clothing and was wearing it but he had also been seen greeting passing Order members as if he were their equal - he was only a teenager!

"Kingsley." Harry turned from his conversation with Tonks after politely excusing himself for a moment to the other male. "If you have

a minute, I would like to speak with you." Kingsley halted and regarded the teenager steadily. Harry smiled and tipped his head a little in the Auror's direction. "Nymph was just telling me you worked with my father and I'd wondered if you might be able to share a story or two with me as everyone else who might be able to tell me about them seems to be of the impression that I already know quite a bit about them." Hermione saw other Order members wince at the thinly veiled insult and saw Harry's eyes flash triumphantly even as he met Kingsley's gaze steadily. "I understand if you're busy." He added this lightly to the end.

The Auror shook his head slowly. "I'd be happy to speak with you." He informed the teen. "Unfortunately, I won't be able to do so right now or at all during your break. If we could schedule a meeting for the Easter holiday...?"

Harry considered this and then nodded. "That is acceptable. Although, I may be busy for some of that break." He didn't specify anything further but Kingsley nodded politely and then stepped towards the fireplace and Floo'ed away to wherever it was he had been heading originally. Harry turned back to Tonks and the two continued their conversation as if nothing had happened.

Pureblood. The word struck Hermione and she jolted slightly in her seat. Pureblood. That was how he was acting. He was acting like one of the Purebloods that went to their school - the Purebloods in Slytherin. Perhaps not one like Malfoy, but one like Blaise Zabini or Theodore Nott - the ones who did not seem to sway either way particularly (though Nott's father was a Death Eater, his son was more tolerable).

Harry and Tonks had left, as had everyone else in the room, and Hermione was alone with her thoughts. Her hand drifted without her will and she found herself feeling skin-warmed metal instead of the occasional brush of wood as she tapped her fingers against the table or the soft whisper of parchment from the thick tome laid out before her.

Hermione absently fiddled with the necklace around her neck and then stopped herself, frowning irritably, and letting it fall from her

grasp. It had been a Christmas gift from someone she'd rather not associate with and she didn't want to look at the thing as if it were something special to be treasured. It was however much she wanted to deny it, a very thoughtful and beautiful gift. The round amulet was made of gold and etched into it was the symbol of the Egyptian goddess Seshat – a goddess of wisdom who had come to be known as a goddess of writing, astronomy, architecture and mathematics – a papyrus leaf split at the stem into seven points over which two crescent-shaped objects arced down on either side like horns.

Hermione did like it, especially since it was accompanied by a book that described all of the protection spells woven into the object and the many of the legends surrounding Seshat as well as a handwritten note informing her that it was an actual artefact.

Normally, one would wonder why such an incredibly thoughtful gift would be so disdained by our curious bookworm but, considering the sender, it wasn't all that unreasonable. Well, it was unreasonable but not to Hermione Granger. You see, the gift was from Lucien SaDiablo.

So, naturally, a spell preventing the necklace's removal by any aside from Lucien had also been added along with a few nifty care spells that would prevent the jewellery from being ruined by abuse.

Needless to say, it had been a plague upon the young woman once she had come to that part of the book after having put the necklace on.

"Hermione?" Ron peered into the kitchen in time to see his best friend hastily dropping a necklace as if she had been burned. "Where'd you get that?"

She looked up at the red-haired youngest Weasley haltingly. Ron was prone to bouts of unexplained and completely unreasonable jealousy. Sometimes his logic for his little sulking periods was so illogical that Hermione felt like banging her head against a wall, repeatedly, just to stop herself from cursing him until he was nothing more than a quivering mass of pink goo.

"From a...friend." She realized all too late who Ron would think it was from. The boy's eyes narrowed and he stared at the necklace with sudden distaste clear on every inch of his freckled face.

"Vicky?" He sneered the word.

"No!" she hastened to reassure her friend before he blew a gasket and they were both left without friends for the week (Harry was proving to be decidedly unhelpful friend-wise, this year, and had been drifting into the company of Ginny, Neville and even the neutral Slytherins over his best-friends as of late). "Not Victor; it was from Lucien – Kirra's older brother."

"Oh." Ron's face relaxed as he crossed the room to sit across from her hesitantly. She watched him patiently as it was obvious he wanted to talk to her about something – something he thought was important. "Hermione," he began awkwardly, as though what he was about to say was stuck in his throat and it was taking an effort to vocalize, "have you noticed Harry acting...different? I mean, obviously, he's different this year that last year but, do you ever find yourself watching him and feeling...out of place? Like...like in our first year with the Stone; he's leaping ahead of us but this time he's not stopping to wait."

The question threw Hermione off guard. For one, it struck very close to home with her previous train of thought – before she'd been distracted with the amulet at her throat. Ron never asked intellectual questions like that. Hell, Ron hardly asked questions period (unless, of course, he was digging for answers to his neglected homework). She'd found Ronald Weasley to be one of those people who would believe themselves right by default until someone corrected them. It was annoying sometimes but it made the two of them an excellent pair as Hermione never passed up the opportunity to put her knowledge to good use.

"I'd noticed." She murmured softly, looking away as a feeling of betrayal swelled in her throat and unease bubbled in her belly. "Ever since he went away during the hols he's started acting...well, Slytherin." Ron's face contorted with rage for a moment and she shot him a sharp look that he wisely took note of and simmered quietly

under as she continued to explain. "Not like Malfoy-Slytherin more like...you know Zabini?" She received a nod, "well like Zabini-Slytherin. He's ambitious and he isn't telling anyone what he's thinking but he's going through with quiet little plans to get him...somewhere. I'm not sure." Silently she added yet but logically she knew that Harry was far more Slytherin than she was and that it was doubtful that she would ever learn the full extent of his actions this year.

"Yeah." Ron swallowed as though it was physically painful to admit that one of the Golden Trio wasn't pure Gryffindor. "Yeah – like that. So you've noticed too."

"Yes." She looked at him and her brow furrowed, suddenly suspicious about his line of questioning. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh!" Ron snapped out of an apparent line of thought and grinned half-heartedly at her. "I just wanted to be sure I wasn't imagining things – that it wasn't just me being jealous or something again like I was in fourth year."

This answer satisfied Hermione and she nodded her acceptance. The two friends – the only real members of the Golden Trio left, if the way Harry was acting was any indication – sat in silence for some time more before they would get up and join the others.

Lucien felt the unease through the link that connected his Ring to the intellectual witch's Christmas present (courtesy of yours truly). He sighed softly, reminding himself that she wasn't from the Tri-Realms and didn't know how to stop herself from broadcasting every emotion through the link (not that she knew the link existed), and tried to ignore the urge to go to her side. Were she from Kaeleer, he would have been there in a second if he wasn't there already. However, seeing as she was from Earth, he was forced to temper that urge and wait for her to relax on her own. It was a trying matter as his mind seemed only too happy to provide images of the brunette female sitting close to her male friends. He bristled at the thought and turned his attention back to watching his Aunt Marian bustled around the kitchen with her new cookbook (also courtesy of yours truly) at hand and a wicked gleam of delighted excitement in her eyes.

He'd always liked watching food being made. Something about the smell and the careful work and order had been captivating for the young Warlord Prince (who had grown up around his mother's poor – and often dangerous – attempts). When he had been little, he would go to the Hall's kitchen and sit quietly while Mrs Beale worked steadily and threatened everyone who came near her kitchen (excluding Lucien and his Aunt Marian, of course) with a ladle...or a knife, pan or pot or any other utensil within an arm's reach. When he was older, about the time his mother brought her suspicion of young Kirra being a natural Black Widow, he'd gone to the kitchens for hushed cooking lessons from Mrs Beale herself (an unthinkable thing, as that was the same time Mrs Beale had sworn never to attempt to teach Jaenelle of any of her offspring ever – his mother had blow half the kitchen apart after a mixed spell and casserole again). He wasn't actually allowed to cook in Mrs Beale's kitchen but the stern matron hadn't any problem with cooking while he was in his own kitchen at his own house (a lovely cottage in Dharo where the shops provided a wonderful shield against female relatives looking to bother Daemon's prodigal son). To this day, Lucien didn't think the Hall was aware he'd been the one to cook the main course of their Winsol feast during the year KaeAskavi and Shadow had come tumbling into the dining room in a tiff over who got to give Kirra a present first.

"Lucien?" He was drawn softly from his thoughts and back to the present by his Aunt's warmly amused voice. "Where were you? It looked as though you were in another place entirely."

"I wish I was." He muttered and then recoiled as his Aunt grinned wickedly and laughed. "I take it back."

"Too late now, nephew." She smiled at him in a way that conveyed she wasn't going to mention this conversation to anyone if he didn't say it was okay. "So...this girl, Hermione, am I right? She's from your sister's new Realm." Marian was already back to working the dough she was making for bread. "Smart, pretty?" he nodded in confirmation and her smile widened, "and she doesn't want a thing to do with you." This last was a statement and he grouched while his Aunt smiled sympathetically. "I wish I could help you, nephew, but I'm afraid you'll just have to keep trying. Though, I'm sure your decision to keep the

fact that her Winsol gift connected you to her a secret was the wisest course to choose. If your Uncle had tried that with me without telling, you can bet I would have whipped a frying pan at his head in less than a second." He smiled at the thought of his warrior uncle cowering under his Aunt's furious stare as she waved a pan threateningly above him. It was an amusing idea and one he wouldn't mind seeing his cousin Daemonar in one day. The fact that his Aunt's throwing ability would break bone nine times out of ten was just an added bonus.

"Harry will be commuting between here and Earth during his school's holidays in the spring." He informed his Aunt, just to watch her eyes light up in delight with the idea of feeding the generally too-thin-in-any-Hearth-Witch's-opinion male. "Do you think I should risk visiting her then?"

"If she hasn't felt your anxiousness already and figured out who it belonged too, then you'll have to. On the other hand, if she has figured it out..." she smiled in a way that was not comforting in the least, "well, she'll find you, I think."

"Your pep-talks need work Aunt." She snorted softly and smiled as she worked. He watched with a smirk as his thoughts ran with plans for his pretty little White-Jeweled witch waiting for him on Earth.

Harry shot a dark look at Zacharias Smith's incredulous look when he informed the boy that he was busy that night helping Snape. Willingly. Honestly, did everyone think so lowly of the resident potions master? Harry felt Hedwig snort through their bond as he failed to block off his thoughts from her and winced. Okay...so maybe he had thought the same thing for the first four years of his time there but he'd changed!

"Yes, Smith, I did volunteer." His features hardened as he peered condescendingly down his nose at the other male – a gesture he had seen Saetan use often enough against other males he despised. It worked just as well as if did for his self-appointed grandfather because Zacharias flinched under the look and shifted nervously. "Is there a problem?"

"No – none." He muttered, sidestepping to put more space between them. Harry was distantly aware that his aura was lashing out and filling up the air around them and so he reigned in the power that was scaring the boy – the power Smith couldn't see anyway. He watched silently as the boy excused himself before he turned back to his two friends.

Ron appeared rather confused and wary of Harry while Hermione was peering at him as though he'd just confirmed one of her worst fears. He raised a single eyebrow at them and the both smiled in eerie unison and tried to bring up a new topic of conversation (their first – one about what types of counter-curses worked best and which ones he should teach in lieu of his planned lessons on a nifty cutting curse that was exceedingly difficult for the average wizard to dodge – had been a failure).

"Hi, Harry," the cheerful voice made him silently excuse himself to his friends and turn back around to face a blushing Cho Chang. His brow furrowed in confusion and Hermione cleared her throat loudly.

"We'll be in the library, Harry." She informed him before jabbing Ron with her elbow and dragging him along with her.

Ron's voice called back as the pair rounded the corner. "Later, mate!"

Harry just shook his head in amusement and turned back to the female waiting for his attention. "Cho," he greeted her evenly with a courteous tilt of his head and a patient smile, "I trust you had a good Christmas?"

"It was pretty quiet, actually." She informed him, still looking rather flushed. "It feels very strange when your little sister has homework and isn't running about being noisy."

"You have a sister?" Harry was genuinely curious, lacking siblings himself, and met her flitting gaze steadily. "How old?"

"Eleven, she's in her first year. Her name's Su." She offered the last with a slight hopeful lilt at the end that prompted Harry to respond.

"She's in...Slytherin, correct?" He smiled in amusement at the sudden flash of protectiveness that ran across the female's pretty face. "Don't worry so much." He chided gently. "There's nothing wrong with ambition and cunning – I, myself, was considered for Slytherin. The only reason I'm a Gryffindor is because I'd had the misfortune of meeting Draco Malfoy on the train that morning..." He smiled at her snort of laughter. "Now," he gently turned their idle chat to a more serious note, "what did you want to speak with me about?"

"Well, oh this is embarrassing," she muttered and flushed before she straightened, "Harry, I just wanted to tell you that, I've thought a lot about this, but...well, I heard you had a crush on me." Harry blinked in surprise, not expecting that of all things.

"I had a crush on you in fourth year." He began slowly. "But I'd gotten over that an age ago. Besides, I fail to see the relevancy of..." Her eyes were shimmering oddly in something more than admiration and he softened when he realized the true issue here. "Cedric?" He didn't phrase it as a question but the extra shimmering dissolved into slow-falling tears. "Cho, you needn't worry about returning my nonexistent affections; even if I did still have a crush on you, I wouldn't dream of pressing you so soon after his death."

"Thank you." She murmured, swiping her eyes hastily to be rid of her tears. "This is silly but, I'd been thinking of ways to make you give up your crush if you'd still had it."

Harry laughed, a rich full laugh, before he turned sparkling eyes upon the Scottish girl. "I'm glad that's been settled then. I'd worried after your visit on the train." She flushed in embarrassment and he chuckled. A thought struck him and he glanced sideways at her, aware of the effect that his next words might have on her composure. "Cho...if you want, I'd be happy to meet with you next Hogsmeade trip so we might talk about him. Cedric."

She went deathly silent but eventually nodded. "Please, if we could." She murmured.

He nodded regally. "It will have to be in the afternoon, though, as I have previous engagements and meetings to take care of."

"That's fine." She had regained her composure and was now turning to leave. "I'll meet you at the Three Broomsticks?"

"Yeah." He nodded at her and waited until she was out of sight before sighing and looking up at an amused Hedwig and a silently cackling Kirra. "You two just don't know when to leave well enough alone, do you?"

"Just for that, I'll not bring Legacy back with me." Harry felt his heart soar at the thought of the Kindred Healer. She'd been the one to tend to him after his final session and she's healed many of the heart-wounds by simply being herself and fussing over him. He adored the wolf and didn't want to miss a chance to see her again and bask in her presence. "I can see you've changed your mind." She teased and he shot her a dark look as Hedwig swooped down to nibble comfortingly on his ear. "Now, about the Easter Holidays, grandpapa had this idea..."

"Harry, this is Blaise Zabini and you already know Neville..." Ginny pointed to each male and glanced at him expectantly. "Blaise is an Empath and Neville has his Affinity so I'm giving them the rest of the potion to help ground their magic. They'll be going through the first transformation with us, if that's okay?"

Harry took in the sight of the new male, Slytherin, Blaise Zabini. The dark-haired boy crossed his arms casually, not at all defensive, and met the emerald stare evenly. Harry brushed against him with his own brand of intertwined magic and felt the other boy's Empathy reach out and meet him. The two magics mixed and mingled before withdrawing and Harry nodded. "I don't mind if he doesn't."

"I don't."

"Good." Ginny nodded in satisfaction and then turned to Harry. "So? We going or not?"

"Oh, so that's why we're going together." He looked at her with a faint smirk. "You just want me to whisk us along the wards."

"Well, of course, you though I would walk?" She snorted and grabbed his offered hand and then Blaise's who in turn took Neville's. Harry closed his eyes and the Sapphire at his neck glowed brightly before they disappeared into a swirling wind surrounded by an infinite void.

The ride through the wards was short and Harry dropped them off right in front of the Room of Requirement before getting out of the Winds himself. Ginny lay sprawled on the ground with Neville while Blaise was standing but swaying a little. Harry grinned, reminded of his first trip through the Winds. "Sorry. I forgot to tell you how disconcerting the landings are."

"Just a little." Blaise agreed, smirking faintly in unison with the Gryffindor as they stared at the other two who were grouching and getting to their feet.

"Just a little, my ass." Ginny grumbled, pacing back and forth three times and waiting for the door to appear. "Get in before I hex the two of you into next week."

"Yes ma'am." They chorused before entering the room quickly at her dark look.

TBC...

Chapter#21

The room they entered was simple and made of stone. There were a few odd pillars laying here and there and torches lit up the large space but otherwise, it was a blank slate - perfect for their unknown transformations.

It had been decided that Ginny would go first as it she that had made the potion in the first place. She'd protested at first but the three males all ignored her and stared pointedly until she gave in and glared at them. It was enough that Harry could practically taste the smug male satisfaction in the air as they waited for her to down her dose of the revealing potion.

The change was an odd one to view. Harry had read that the first transformation actually changed your body slowly so that you could get a feel for the process involved in being an animagus but he hadn't been prepared for the slow morph of human into animal. It reminded him eerily of the Polyjuice potion and he resisted the urge to scrunch up his face in disgust at the cacophony of sounds – bones shifting and organs changing – crunching, popping and squelching that grated on his nerves and made his stomach churn.

Ginny's red hair shortened but her hairline began to stretch and travel all the way down her body, disappearing beneath the edge of her robes. Her face lengthened and her cinnamon eyes turned black and sharp as if she were wearing a mask in the shape of some ethereal lupine creature. He waited with what he thought was amazing patience as she began to shrink and he could begin to tell what form she would be when the transformation was complete.

He saw hints of white and black fur while the red that now covered her whole face was still the same red as her hair. As Harry watched, the red began to take on a brownish hue as darker hairs rippled across her face and into the fur that had absorbed her clothes into the new shape. The magic of the transformation simply turned the clothes into something that the magic would recognize as being a part of the original shape and as such it would shift with the person.

Suddenly, just as the transformation was nearly complete, the form halted. The fur rippled and darkened before the red shot back as

brilliantly as ever. The dark of her eyes was lightening and then darkening repeatedly and Harry's instincts sharpened upon the female he had claimed as his. Green eyes narrowed dangerously as he watched, ready to do whatever was necessary to protect the younger female from harm.

Then, just as suddenly, the struggle with the form ceased and the brownish red smoothed across the body that had been contorting and rippling all the while. Harry pulled in his temper and eyed the rather large female fox before him. The vixen's paws looked to be dipped in ink and her tail handsomely coated with a brilliant white fur along its tip. The brown-tint in the fur accented each sleek like of her body and cunning black eyes gleamed up at them from above a spattering of white spots along the top of the long snout (her freckles and her defining feature).

The vixen cocked her head at them and slowly put one paw out, taking a careful step. This hesitant step was followed by another and then another and soon she was trotting in a circle around the three wizards. Harry smiled faintly at the sight and waited for Ginny to finish her explorations with her new form and sit down before them with a smug expression. The shift back was quicker and the sounds of the change barely audible before Ginny as a human sat before them with a delighted expression.

Harry's eyes caught a change in her human form as well and he watched the brown that tinted her fur, in turn, tint her hair a darker shade. He motioned to her hair and she pulled a piece out in front of her face as she examined the shade. A faint frown creased her brow and he heard her faintly murmur: "That isn't supposed to happen..."

He had planned on asking her what she meant but Zabini had already spoken and ruined his chance. "I'll go next."

"And then me." Neville stated quickly, shooting a cheeky grin at Harry. The Warlord Prince smirked and shook his head in amusement at the childish claiming of order but nodded briefly to the other boy to let him know that his claim had been acknowledged.

Blaise swallowed the potion in one go. Harry offered a hand to help Ginny up and met her confused gaze curiously. "It isn't anything major." She murmured. "But I think the instructions I dug up in the Black's library are so old that these transformations are different than the ones in today's books."

"You got this from the Black's library?" Harry waited as the first bit of the change began, listening to the squelch of internal organs changing while Blaise's body remained externally the same. "I didn't even know they had a library. Where is it?"

"You have to ask Kreature," his face twisted in disgust, "after you make a few comments about mudbloods – the old thing doesn't know the difference between truth and lies anymore after serving that portrait for so long – and he'll take you there. I can't tell you much more...it's spelled to only allow those who know where it is to find it – to keep knowledge within the family." She shot him a look to remind him that she was still a pureblood.

Harry smiled apologetically, aware that his friend valued her heritage more than the rest of her family, and turned his attention to the outward change of the Slytherin.

Thick fur had sprouted and absorbed his robes quickly. It was predominately grey but with brown along its legs and mixed in with white. The Slytherin's eyes changed colour much as Ginny's had and adopted a clear golden-yellow colour rimmed thickly in black. The colour struck a chord in Harry as he instantly recognized the form with far less fuss that Ginny's had caused him. The body followed more quickly than Ginny's and soon Harry stood shaking his head in amusement at the form Blaise had taken.

Blaise was a wolf. A little on the small side, by Harry's judgement, weighing approximately sixty-five to seventy pounds and standing about twenty-six inches, he looked similar to Legacy (who was a grey wolf). As a human, Blaise was fairly large and strong; it was amusing to find that his animagus form was on the smaller end of the spectrum for the breed. Even Legacy (who was fairly small in comparison to her pack-mates), Harry was certain, was larger than he. The fur was thinner than Harry was used to seeing but he figured it was just the

wolf's pelage changing from its thick winter coat to its lighter summer coat (Legacy's home pack was farther north in comparison to Hogwarts and their winters tougher – also, he'd spent much of his time in Glacia with their packs). Harry looked for a defining feature but for the life of him couldn't find one. Then again, he didn't know Blaise all that well.

Neville let out an 'oh' of comprehension following Harry's silent recognition. "Italian wolf – they're an endangered species!"

Ginny's attention sharpened upon her friend, looking over the lanky beast that scratched absently behind one ear, curiously. Harry took in the tawny-grey colouring and the lack of thick fur with more approval this time over. Italy was considerably warmer and smaller than Glacia and the rest of the Kindred territories so it only made sense that the Italian wolf was smaller and lacked the thick fur coat that the wolves he knew needed to survive the harsh winters. He nodded in satisfaction – his predominant Warlord Prince instincts content with knowing his female was surrounded by strong males (although this also thoroughly annoyed him as well).

Blaise shifted back into his regular form and shook his head as though dizzy. His composure returned a second later and he looked up at Ginny curiously with slightly narrowed eyes. Harry looked down at Ginny expecting an explanation now that she had further proof that she wasn't a special case. She was not forthcoming. She simply smiled and congratulated Blaise on finding his form before looking at Neville and urging him to hurry up.

"I'm going." Neville teasingly held the vial suspended in mid-air above his mouth for several seconds longer than necessary until Ginny made as if to force it down his throat. He laughed and drank the whole thing in two swallows.

Like Blaise, the transformation was considerably faster than Ginny's and she was frowning from beside Harry. He could smell it in her psychic scent and silently wondered what Neville's form would be; the non-descript dark fur that was spreading wasn't a very good indication.

Neville had always been quiet. Then again, Harry didn't pay much attention to any of the other boys in his year aside from Ron. The emerald-eyed boy frowned faintly at this thought. He had realized that he wasn't very observant of his year-mates but he hadn't realized it was so bad. The only characteristics he could think of in relation to Neville were the false ones that he had blindly seen for all his four years at Hogwarts. This bothered him as it reminded him far too much of the haughty dismissal purebloods gave to those 'beneath' them.

That pureblood thought made him internally chastise himself again. He was no better if he started thinking of purebloods as all alike in a group. He knew better than most that purebloods were as diverse in their thinking and alliances as anyone else in the world. It reminded him uncomfortably of the story that Daemon had told him of Harry's self-appointed grandfather (Saetan) and a place called Zuulaman. That had been a purge without discrimination simply because of the fault of a few. If Harry were to blame all purebloods for bad experiences with Malfoy and his gang...Harry didn't want to think about things like that. While he wasn't nearly as strong a Black Widow as Daemon and Saetan, even the mere idea was terrifying for the teen.

"What breed is that?" Ginny demanded. Harry snapped back to the present and took in Neville's form in surprise.

At a height of six feet when standing and easily weighing three-hundred pounds, Neville was a large bear. His fur was long and dark with a v-shape of white on his chest and a cream-coloured snout with a black nose. The fur around his face framed it like a lion's mane and made him look exotic. His claws looked more like a sloth's than any bear Harry had ever seen but it suited the rest of the body and didn't look out of place in the least.

"Definitely someplace south..." Blaise was eying his friend critically while Neville maturely yawned loudly in his friend's face and splattered him with drool. The Zabini heir wiped his face calmly and stared at the Gryffindor unimpressed. "I'd say a Sloth Bear. The gypsies danced with them and fought with them as a way of earning

money for ages. He looks a lot like the ones I've seen in pictures. Of course, I could be wrong." The 'highly unlikely' went unsaid.

"I'm bigger than you." Neville teased as he got a human mouth back. Something in his eye looked absolutely delighted and at ease compared to his usual appearance. The lack of whatever made a major difference. Harry was pleasantly surprised.

"You're big enough." Blaise raised an eyebrow superiorly and smirked as Neville blushed crimson. Ginny laughed while Harry felt vaguely unsettled. It wasn't that he had a problem, he just wasn't close friends with these people (aside from Ginny) and still wasn't comfortable being open around them as they were open around him.

"Harry," Ginny turned to him expectantly, understanding in her eyes even if she didn't know precisely what had put him ill-at-ease, "it's your turn."

Harry stared at her for a long moment, weighing his options once more on this endeavour. Finding your form was a very different thing from learning your form and he wasn't sure he would have the time and patience to manage it. Still... his thoughts turned to his training and to all his new friends and responsibilities that he had willingly taken on and his lips curled faintly in a smile. He wouldn't change that for the entire world and he wouldn't change his mind now that the time had come to take the plunge. He swallowed his does of the potion and waited.

He felt the magic in his body jolt. The air around him suddenly felt thick and heavy and weighed down upon him uncomfortably. He squirmed in place, feeling an itching creep up along his skin that made the hair on his body stand on end. A second jolt ran up his spine and then spread out in a rippling of jolts to the rest of his limbs. He felt his heartbeat pulse in time with the third massive surge.

Harry could feel the moisture in the air, the strange tingle that moved all through his body. He focussed on that tingle, memorizing the feel as the jolting of power grew until he felt like he could take no more. An explosion of power made the change come in an instant and the

Room of Requirement around him expanded to epic proportions as trees sprung up around them and a mountain loomed in the distance.

The sky that stretched above them was grey and thick with clouds. He felt the massive thick drops of rain strike his body and chill him to the bone but all of this seemed to no longer matter.

He exploded upward. The change was complete and he still had no idea what he was. He only knew that he wanted to move he needed to go somewhere to get rid of the energy! It was crackling in his bones and dancing on his fur and the jolts of power were now a constant thrum of sparking, cackling, electrifying energy and he needed to let it OUT!

The change wore off as abruptly as it had come as he crashed into the ground with a deafening boom and the energy vanished in a white-hot flash of light that illuminated the vast plain that the Room had become. When the light faded, Harry wobbled dizzily in place before he was able to regain his balance. Still, there was a strange feeling of something moving beneath his now-human skin.

The three of his companions looked at him, utterly bewildered and horrified at the explosive transformation. The Room shrank back down into the original empty chamber they had been using as Harry panted and dripped with sweat from exertion.

"What...was THAT?" Blaise was the first to demand this. Neville gaped at his roommate while Ginny stared blankly ahead, eyes unfocussed and frozen. Harry blinked and narrowed his eyes to try and see properly; everything looked to be bathed in light. The torches dimmed near him and he was able to see albeit everything was still a shade lighter than it should have been.

"I have no idea."

It was six o'clock at night and Harry's mental walls struggled to stay upright. Earlier, Kirra had removed her temporary ones from his mind and helped him to build his own that ran on his own power. They were weak, especially after his foray into his unknown animagus form only a few hours before he was due to go to his Occlumency lessons with Severus Snape, and he could feel the electrifying presence of his

other form drifting around his mind and acquainting itself with his magic. He was anxious to see the book Ginny had taken from the Black library so he could read the chapter on the potion himself and see what the old version had been designed to do. As far as he knew, animagus forms weren't supposed to be able to become a separate entity in ones mind.

He paused outside of the potions master's office and stretched out a thin web of power to make sure the professor was within. Sure enough, Severus Snape was inside his office and waiting with a patience that surprised the young Lord Potter (as was his technical title). He knocked and entered without further delay.

"Mr Potter." For a moment, the courtesy startled the Warlord Prince and he snapped to face the shadowy visage of Severus Snape with narrowed eyes. They flashed angrily with an internal light and Snape tilted his head mildly with a single raised brow. Harry mentally sent the animagus form away and shook his head slightly, dismissing the silent inquiry as not important. "Well, you know why you are here."

"I don't, actually." Harry's forehead creased in annoyance at the thought of the vague orders given him by the Headmaster. "I know what I am to learn during these lessons but I don't know why and that is what has been bothering me."

"The Dark Lord is a skilled Legilimens. Headmaster Dumbledore believes that he has been using it to delve into your mind when it is unprotected...when you sleep, for instance." Dark eyes stared pointedly at Harry's famous scar and then met the annoyed emerald gaze.

"The images have been going both ways then, sir." Harry stared ahead blankly, trying to bank his instincts so that he wouldn't ride the wards in the castle up to the Headmaster's office and strangle the old wizard. "Dumbledore wouldn't want that to stop as my visions have been a useful source of information. That would mean that it is in his best interests not to have me learn Occlumency and yet...here I am." He focussed briefly on Snape before continuing to speak as his mind supplied the likely reasons for his observations. He fumed as the words spilled out. "Which means that he asked you to teach me in the

hopes that your hatred for my father would have you destroy what few mental defences I have?" It was a question but not phrased that way.

Snape's eyes glittered oddly triumphantly as though something incredible had been confirmed. "Salazar, forgive me – you would have done well in Slytherin with that mind, Mr Potter. It is a wonder what a few weeks away from your Gryffindor Pride can do."

"Hn," Harry smirked at the pun, tasting the magic that prevented Snape from openly agreeing that Harry was correct – an Oath then... "Imagine what I could do if I were instructed in, say, as I was never a very good defender, legilimency?"

"If that were to happen, Potter," Snape looked away, obviously trying to find a way to word his next sentence so that the Oath he had obviously sworn to Dumbledore wouldn't silence him, "one might be suggested to look in the library's far back corner behind the portrait of a snake curled by an apple. The password might be Pureblood for the main room and there might be rumours about a special room accessible only by a Parseltongue command to the snake in the portrait that guards this hypothetical room." This was all said very quickly and Harry barely had any time to commit it to memory before Snape had turned away and was ignoring him, staring at a pensive (that Harry recognized as Dumbledore's) intently.

"Thank you, sir." Harry bowed despite the fact that his professor couldn't see it. "May I take my leave now that our lesson is over?"

"I want you back the same time next Wednesday, Potter." The sibilant croon of his voice was weighed carefully.

"Yes sir." Harry backed out of the office and shut the door. It really was too bad he couldn't learn Occlumency from Severus Snape; he'd been looking forward to it. Still...the compensation was decent enough. Harry smirked and started back to the Gryffindor common room with a slight bounce in his step as he contemplated what this secret room in the library would have to offer his newest goal.

Ron watched Harry enter the library in the smooth practised way that was entirely too feral for any human. He didn't look tired or unwell at

all – like Hermione had predicted – and in fact, was scanning the library intently before gliding over to slide into his seat and flash a brief welcoming grin to his friend. Ron watched a strange light dance in Harry's eyes as the teen glanced briefly down at the half-written DADA homework on the table between the two. "Is it worth it?" He asked lightly. Harry had been refusing to complete any of the assignments that Umbridge had set them and was spending quite a bit of time with Filch in detention. Strangely, Harry never seemed to complain about these detentions and often returned before curfew (as Filch hardly ever allowed). Ron had been startled the first time Harry had returned and, after a few more repeats of this incident, had waited by the portrait hole until Harry came into view. The black-haired teen was being 'escorted' by Mrs Norris and the haggardly feline had purred loudly as Harry stooped to stroke her along her back and then bowed briefly before entering the common room. She had watched until both boys were inside the room before leaving.

Ron had tried this 'trick' of Harry's the next day and had been rewarded by long bleeding scrapes on his arm and a furious Filch assigning him detention for a month (later shortened to a week by a stern-but-fair McGonagall).

"Of course it is!" Hermione shot their friend a dark look and Ron sighed, already knowing the rest of her response. "All work is important Harry! This is your future we're talking about!"

"Hermione, honestly," the teen was shaking his head and smiling amusedly, "I highly doubt anyone will hold this years Defence marks against me. I am the Boy-Who-Lived." Hermione glared harshly at him but Harry was staring over her shoulder at something. Ron followed his gaze, searching for one of their year-mates but only saw a group of first years decorated with green and silver accents of the Slytherin house. He glanced back at his friend, certain that Harry was simply staring into space, but the other male was already striding across the room towards the Slytherins and was in the process of pulling out a chair and sitting down.

The dark-haired male leaned towards a girl with long, glossy raven-black hair who was now watching him with guarded curiosity and a hint of arrogant disdain. Harry said something to her and the girl's

eyes widened faintly in surprise as she nodded curtly. Harry beamed and said something else, tilting his head to speak to the group as a whole before meeting the girl's steady gaze once more. He was ignoring the suspicious and dirty looks some of the other first-years were giving him (these looks were masked quickly when the girl Harry had first spoken to shot them all pointed looks with faintly narrowed eyes. They gulped and ducked in their seats as she returned her attentions to Harry Potter) and waiting for a response, obviously.

The girl nodded after a long moment of the two staring and her face smoothed into one of calm indifference. Harry stood, took her hand in his and bowed over it (an action that caused many of the Slytherin's gazes to flash approval briefly) before leaving the group to their previous activities. Ron waited with patience he didn't feel as Harry returned to their table and raised an eyebrow at the dirty looks Ron and Hermione were giving him.

"Yes?" The tone was one of a person reprimanding someone without calling them out on bad behaviour.

"What was that?" Ron demanded, unable to voice his disapproval silently as Hermione was able to do with just a look. "Consorting with snakes now?"

"Slytherins." Harry corrected mildly, annoyance flashed across his mildly amused face. "I was just speaking with Su about getting some of her friends to join the DA. I noticed that we lack any from Slytherin house and since I know that none of the upper years – aside from neutrals of course – would join..." He smiled at his own clever idea – one that made Ron want to retch at the thought. Consorting with Slytherins, with all those future little Death Eaters...it was horrible. "Something wrong?" Ron wasn't stupid; he could hear the warning note in Harry's voice – the one that he sometimes used to croon insults at Umbridge and Malfoy and the one that scared Ron the most.

"As much as I hate to admit it, Ron is right." Hermione looked at Harry intently and he turned to face her with a deceptively mild expression. "You can't trust Slytherins Harry."

Harry didn't reply. He looked at the two of them silently. His eyes searched their expressions and, when he met Ron's eyes, Ron felt as if those intense emerald orbs were piercing into his very soul and shivered. Harry's expression wilted faintly, as if horribly saddened, before it turned icy smooth and slightly sleepy as he stood in a fluid motion. "Excuse me, I promised to meet with someone and I'm going to be late." Ron knew it was a lie – Harry didn't really have anyone aside from Ron and Hermione to hang out with; everyone else was alternately afraid of him or couldn't get over the legend.

The second-youngest Weasley watched the Golden Boy of the Golden Trio leave the library with a stiff politeness and an icy expression of betrayal reflecting in his emerald eyes.

"Why on earth would you do that?" Kirra was abruptly behind them. Her icy eyes matched Harry's expression as she slowly peered down at them. She was wearing black pants and tall leather boots with a small heel. The midnight-blue tunic was decorated with silver and gold swirling decorations in both thread and beads and it had wide bell sleeves that cut off just below her elbows and were held up by black ribbons. Her hair was as wild and spiky as ever and her wrists jingled with simple gold and silver bands a mere millimetre wide. "Can you even begin to understand the major political move it is for him to make an unofficial alliance with Su's family while he still has an alliance with yours, Weasley?" She fixed Ron with a look that made the boy shrink in his seat.

Thus far, he'd had no reason to be in Kirra's presence for any extended period of time. She was normally seen here and there around the castle and in the company of the oddest people – from Draco Malfoy to Luna Lovegood to Colin Creevy – but she rarely bothered to speak with Harry's closest friends.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Hermione demanded. Ron could hear the indignant note in her voice that suggested she highly doubted whatever it was Kirra was speaking of was anything truly important.

"Su's family have been neutral for as long as anyone can remember. The children have always gone to whichever house was suited best

for them and none of them have ever swayed to either side of the war. Ron's family, the Weasleys, have been a Light family for generations. Harry is a Grey and has been making various connections with families all across the neutral family territory – for him to openly consort with a family heavily sided with the Light is...very dangerous." The young woman spoke to the two of them as if they were idiots not to know this. "Why on earth do you think Hedwig has been visiting him so often? He's needed to keep a correspondence with various contacts in both this Realm and my own. He's been adopted there by my grandpapa...hey," her voice suddenly turned into one of curious confusion, "that would make him my uncle. Unless...no, wait, he isn't my uncle. He's my cousin. He's just grandpapa's ward; not his son. Not the point." She shook her head. "The point is, you should probably be a little more sensitive to your friend; it isn't like he doesn't have other options." She levelled them with a pointed look and turned to join Luna at a table where the other girl seemed to be making a dream-catcher.

Valari was having a moment of clarity and could actually see her mate, Moonfang, sitting alertly on guard by her den. She knew that she had exhausted her jewels weaving this last web that was spread across the back wall of one of the side chambers of the elaborate tunnel and room system that the kindred wolves had dug out for her. She climbed to her feet and swayed a little, her vision flickering from colour to shades of grey and shadowy possibilities, before managing to get her paws firmly beneath her. She began to make her way up the long tunnel towards the burnt-orange male.

/ Mate. / She greeted him in one word as anything more would degenerate into ramblings coming from the Darkness instead of from her. / Has the fourth Dream found herself yet? ./

The flick of his tail and the confusion that coloured the air around him orange with blue streaks told her that he didn't know. She felt him try and speak to her on a thread but her own twisted and twined and played with colours rather than meet his when she tied. She dismissed his comment as unimportant if the colours didn't want her to hear the words.

The colours were playing across her vision, showing her blue eyes and blonde hair as well as a bright cackling thing that flashed rapidly

in white-hot light. Valari stared at Moonfang as his burnt-orange coat slowly bled into the usual grey and white shadows she had lived amongst for so long. The colours were dancing above her head now, taunting her with sanity, and she slumped onto the path of shadows that had formed under her paws.

/ Lady! ./ Oh? Who was that? Valari cocked her head to one side. There were hunks of dancing meat in front of her, all dripping blood the color of the Prince's Black, and she was having trouble concentrating on who that voice was. She swatted one large paw at the meat and it blew away like dust in a breeze. She felt something bump her and was abruptly pulled upwards into a section of the Twisted Kingdom that was called Clarity. It wasn't actually clear and colours had a tendency to twist and dance and not stay where they were supposed to but it was clearer than the usual world of shadows and omens she walked in. She found her mate again and purred at the sight of the grey wolf, Legacy, who was as clear as crystal sitting before her amidst shadow and colour. Golden eyes stared into the vacant ones of Valari and she felt the strange magic that came from being one of the few dreams left from before the Purge expand and encompass the tigress enough that she could see the large chunk of meat Moonfang had dragged to where she had strangely decided to lounge while in mid-step.

/ Eat. / The wolf's tone brooked no room for argument and Valari did as ordered, keeping an eye on the wolf that could bring Clarity to her mind.

All those who were residents of the Twisted Kingdom recognized the special something in Legacy. The wolf was a Healer and a Queen and strangely had an ability that only the Kindred had ever noticed – even Kaeleer's Heart and her daughter couldn't see the ability. Legacy was the last wish and dream of her mother, Ash, that she would rear a pup that could serve the strange figure that had come to her in a dream. Ash hadn't been very healthy at that time and even Valari had been able to rise up from the Twisted Kingdom to see the wolf's mind slipping beyond madness and into the Darkness. Valari had been the one to watch as young Legacy was found to be a Healer and began to grow adept at her talent. Valari had been the one to show Legacy, when asked, what the Twisted Kingdom was

like. It had been a difficult task as Legacy had chosen that time to discover her other talent.

Legacy was able to bring clarity, temporarily, to those in the Twisted Kingdom with her presence. It took a subtle embrace of their broken minds by her soft balanced power and the wolf remaining solid in the face of insanity trying to pull her down with the one she was trying to help but it could be done. Unfortunately, most couldn't tell that Legacy could do this and those who could weren't able to be coherent enough to tell anyone. Valari knew this and hadn't bothered to try and tell. Occasionally, she managed to demand that 'the she-wolf bitch from the dead fire' be brought before her but other than that she needed to wait for the Healer-Queen to make her rounds.

/ Do you know if the fourth Dream found herself? ./ Valari demanded with feline arrogance.

/ No. / Legacy bared her fangs at the rude tone but continued. / Eat and maybe let Lady Valari make sense of darkness-words. /

Valari sulked and ate the meat (that she had been ignoring in favour of the interesting swirls of colour that the half-formed webs about the clearing made in the air). Sometimes, she wished that the she-wolf bitch would just forget she was a Healer and let Valari filter her visions through the Clarity she provided and be done with it.

Legacy sat back and panted in laughter. It wasn't every day that a single wolf could hold power over a full-grown big-cat and said big-cat's mate.

Chapter#22

Harry stared pensively at the fireplace from his seat directly in front of it in the Gryffindor Common Room. Ginny was away someplace with Neville and Blaise researching their animagus forms and anyone else he would normally be able to join weren't lingering anywhere that Umbridge could possibly reach them. He contemplated calling Hedwig and penning a few letters to Knotjaw about one of the discreet investments he had been making in the case that he was forced to spend yet another summer without contact at the Dursley's. He immediately threw that thought out the window. He had no reason to bother Knotjaw after all the work that the goblin had done to get his Potter Signet Ring sent to him (which was under a clever glamour and illusion and carefully tucked away in one of his trunk's secret compartments) and a list of all his assets and his parent's will.

The will wasn't very long. It simply stated that everything went to Harry when he came of legal age and contained a list of possible guardians. A note from his mother said that if he was to live with his Aunt that he was to be informed of Hogwarts as if he were a muggleborn child and that someone be sent to check on him periodically. He inwardly simmered when Knotjaw included a message with the letter that said that Dumbledore had been present for the reading of the will and that, according to anyone who asked, the instructions had been followed out under his jurisdiction.

Next, Harry considered writing a brief update about the goings on at Hogwarts to Cho and Su Chang's parents. He'd learned from Su that their father was an ambassador to the Chinese Ministry and was often away. When he'd expressed interest in possibly getting some information about the magical creatures native to China, Su had recommended that he write her father and ask him if he would be willing to help. That had actually taken most of his brief encounter with her but Hermione and Ron and their looks of utter disappointment didn't need to know that.

Before that, he'd been in contact with them because Mrs Chang was one of the leading authorities on magical fabrics and was a top designer around the world (but only in select circles and so not well

known to the public) and he had been looking into having some proper robes and such designed for protection and battle. She had been very helpful and had been the one to urge him to actually confront Cho about her curious behaviour – she had said flatly that if her daughter was interested in him in the slightest she would have heard about it and that whatever insane thought was in her eldest's head needed to be addressed before her behaviour got ridiculous.

He'd quietly applied to Mrs Zabini for some advice about being the head of a pureblood house. She'd been delighted to help (any friend of her son's friend was as good as her son if you asked her!) and sent him plenty of literature and some helpful pointers on the current alliances and politics throughout the modern-day purebloods. He'd been informed of many of the big-time scandals of history so some references wouldn't go over his head during receptions and had been receiving almost weekly reports about the latest...well, gossip really...from her pretty much since he'd met Blaise (actually near the beginning of the year when Ginny had dragged him off to find the Slytherin and steal his Arithmancy book). Blaise had casually mentioned that it would be advisable to Harry to make alliances with the Neutral families and then had slipped in his mother's name (Shaylee Zabini) and Hedwig hadn't a single problem finding the woman.

The fire cackled, a log falling as the one beneath it crumbled abruptly to ash, and Harry blinked in surprise. The sudden rush of his heat on his face made his eyes water and he leaned back, narrowing emerald eyes irritably. He really hated having to give up on his friends but their momentary falling-out (as he highly doubted Ron would like being out of the limelight for very long) but it was necessary. He needed to be ignored in order to sneak out during the Easter Holidays for his one-day Apparition coaching and exam and he had been tentatively invited to join Neville and Blaise at the Zabini family manor for a portion of the break. He hadn't agreed yet but, logically, he knew it would be a perfect opportunity to practice the animagus transformation (assuming he could figure out what his form was).

Something startled him from his thoughts. An intense feeling of happiness bubbled, not in his belly as it should have, but in the back of his mind. While he outwardly laughed with just a touch of insanity,

he turned inwards and prodded his sleeping animagus form awake. The electrifying entity that was both him and not him grouched but shot off into the far reaches of his mind to seek out the disturbance. It returned in less than a second and Harry realized who the emotion belonged to. It was the Dark Lord.

The Warlord Prince's lips curled in slight amusement that was all his own. Whenever Voldemort was happy it meant that Dumbledore was unhappy and that made everyone happy (everyone of consequence anyways).

A clock in the room chimed and Harry heaved a sigh. He would have to wait until the morning to find out what had made the Dark Lord the happiest he had been in over fourteen years. He stood and went up to the dorms, ignoring Ron after shortly stating that he was tired and going to get an early start the next morning (because, really, when Kirra go it into her head that you were out of practice, you listened and got your ass kicked with a practice stick). He climbed into bed and shut the hangings, laying his glasses on the bedside table.

His night was superbly peaceful (if you ignored the awkward feeling of being watched by something within your own head) and he woke with the sun. The trip down to the lake was a quick one and he warmed up just to get knocked off his feet several times over by a grouchy Kirra who desperately needed coffee just as badly as he needed practice. He escorted her back up to the castle and grinned as she vanished to sleep through her Divination class no doubt.

He sat silently and peered at the plates that filled rapidly around his seat at the Gryffindor table. Various fresh fruit glistened in the morning sunlight and heaps of all styles of eggs lay scattered near a stack of hot toast. All of the food was steaming with freshness or else he could feel the coolness just by proximity. Harry smiled and ate a meal, delighted when he found a plate of nutcakes that, while excellent, wasn't as good as Marian's or Mrs Beale's.

Hedwig's link in his mind felt closer and he turned glinting emerald eyes upwards to the wide open owl-entrance as she soared in. Her golden eyes stared down at the hall before she deemed the near-

empty place worthy of her presence and descended. Smooth silent stroke slowed her downwards spiral and her talons gripped into the worn wood of the table as she landed.

"Good morning." He blinked at her as she stole some of his bacon in a blatantly obvious move. "Hungry?"

"I was teaching hatchlings to hunt all night." She informed him grumpily. "They are absolutely noisy, this newest nest, and scared away all my dinner."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He ignored the odd looks other early risers gave him for speaking to his owl. "Do you have something for me?"

"Lady Chang sent more samples: they're on your bedside table - Rex let me in. Lady Zabini won't have anything for a few weeks." Hedwig's head tilted and then jerked as she swallowed a section of his eggs. "I don't bring the paper and you don't have it delivered. So...nothing, I'm afraid."

"I see." He smirked a little and gently pet her head. "Just come to steal my breakfast then?"

"I think you mean my breakfast." She looked pointedly at his now-empty plate.

"My mistake." He laughed lightly. Hedwig leapt into the air and buffeted his head with one wing before leaving the hall. He didn't take offence and he didn't mind that she left - he knew full well that Hedwig loved him more than anything and that she loved him unconditionally.

He turned back to his breakfast, intent on getting more, when someone cleared their throat directly behind him. Harry turned in his seat, warily expecting Dolores Umbridge, to see Su Chang standing quietly there in the space between the Gryffindor and Slytherin Tables. His head tilted in silent inquiry and she smirked. "Good morning Mr Potter."

"Ms Chang." He tipped his head to her politely. "May I help you?"

"It's the other way around, today." She informed him, holding out a roll of parchment and a thick book. "I checked some of the books I brought from the family library and came up with this list. They are all creatures related to storms or the like in mythology and in real life. I hope it helps..."

"Thank you, it will." He accepted the gift, pleased and delighted that she had gotten back to him so quickly with an answer (even if she'd only given him the suggestion to ask her father). He had asked for a book or list of exotic creatures that matched the vague description he had given her of his animagus form. He said he needed detailed anatomical drawings of the creatures and hadn't expected the young girl to find any animal that matched the description.

"Be sure to try chapter four." She continued. "It has all of the creatures associated with lightning and storms. Gale Birds (more commonly known as Storm Phoenixes) are first on the list but it doesn't quite match your description, although it is close."

Harry hummed in acknowledgement and began to flip through the pages. "Good day, Ms Chang." He muttered absently. She rolled her eyes and turned, long black hair whipping with the sharpness of her whirl, and returned to the Slytherin table.

Harry continued to pursue the book as other students and the professors began to trickle into the Great Hall. Ron and Hermione eventually came down and sat beside him. He glanced up briefly, annoyed that they would dare intrude upon him after he had so pointedly dismissed them from his life the night before. He'd had a whole four years of close-knit friendship with them and it was hard enough to let them go as he continued to move forward without having them try and attach themselves to his hip. Emerald eyes narrowed and returned to his book where he continued to pursue a chapter on electric eels and their more magical counterparts.

He was so engrossed in his reading that he did not acknowledge Hermione's yelp nor the subsequent whispering. In fact, he would have been quite content not to notice anything at all if it hadn't been for the sharp spike of anger tainting an otherwise calm psychic scent.

His head snapped up the moment he identified the source of the anger and hardened emerald eyes met simmering cinnamon.

Ginny calmly laid her copy of the paper within his reach and he took it, already wary of what he might find. He was so startled at what he saw that his animagus form also recoiled with an electrifying shriek of anger.

Bellatrix Lestrange. He eyed the long unkept dark hair and the heavy lidded eyes in distaste. The pale skin and the thin lips and the aristocratic features he recognized all too well. He could tell she had once been pretty, maybe even beautiful, but, like any resident of Azkaban, that beauty had been robbed of her.

Bellatrix Lestrange. The very name made a violent sparking of rage dance in his eyes. The caption only made that spark sharpen into a lethal weapon. Convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.

This woman was the cause of his friend's suffering. This woman was the one who had taken away Neville's parents without actually removing them from his life. This woman was going to die!

"Harry." His eyes snapped to Ginny's and her look of utter disappointment made him wince heavily and avert his gaze. Ginny knew what he was thinking and the very idea that his Ginny could ever have thoughts similar to his own made him reign in his temper before she fell into the same strand of thought. "Anything?" She didn't need to clarify.

"Happiness." He murmured. "Happiest he's been in fourteen years."

"Naturally." She scowled down as she accepted her paper back and scanned the article. "Lovely, a mass breakout. Neville is going to love this...Neville!" Her eyes widened and shot down to where Neville was staring blankly at the copy of the paper a stoic Blaise Zabini had set in front of him. The tall Slytherin was watching the younger boy carefully, dark eyes were so terrifying to behold that none of the Gryffindors were even complaining at his presence.

Neville glanced down the table at the mention of his name. His motions were slow and his face so distinctly lacking emotion that Harry was momentarily startled. Ginny sharply turned her eyes on Blaise and indicated the door with a tilt of her head. The elder grabbed Neville's arm and hauled him to his feet, dragging the boy quickly out of the hall. Harry, who worried for Neville but knew he would be counter-productive to bringing the boy out of his stupor, nodded solemnly to the red-haired female as she shot him an apologetic look and darted after her two friends. She dodged around Hagrid, who was entering the hall at that moment, and was gone.

Harry eyed the portrait with the snake and the apple. The long black snake stared at him without even blinking its inner-eyelids once. Its tongue flickered out as if it might smell him even through the portrait. \$ Human? New Human? \$ It hissed in interest. The sibilant croon of Parseltongue washed over Harry's senses and his lips quirked a little. \$ Hm...does the lightning-child want to get in, I wonder. He'll need a password and passwords aren't given to stinky cats... \$

\$ They are given to Speakers though. \$ Harry smirked at the painted snake as it hissed in distaste at being startled by his sudden revelation. \$ I apologize. I was told you guard not one but two rooms...? \$

\$ Is that a statement or a question, lightning-child? \$ The snake asked waspishly.

Harry bowed his head in both apology and to placate the irate serpent. \$ A statement. My question would be: will you let me into the second room? \$

The black serpent hissed at him - a generic hiss that didn't actually mean anything but that sounded both impressed and annoyed at the same time. It was obvious that the little thing was highly offended that it had not been made aware of a Speaker in advance to the Speaker's visit and Harry winced a little internally at the thought of Snape being refused entrance to this secret section of the library. Finally, after an moment of exaggerated thought, the snake hissed and the section of stone that the small portrait was hanging on depressed into the wall. It sank back until light spilled around the edges and a space was made on either side that led to - what Harry

could see only a sliver of - an illuminated room with soft fur rugs carpeting the floor.

\$ Thank you. \$ He hissed to it pleasantly.

\$ Normally, \$ the snake told him imperiously, \$ when I open just the first room, the wall folds back into wide steps and my portrait gets tucked away between steps until everyone is in the room. I much prefer the second room. \$

\$ So the second room is on the first floor? \$ Harry mused and laughed a little at the snake's smug amusement. \$ Was that your doing? \$

\$ Not at all. Though I did find it humorous - until I became the guardian. \$

\$ Thank you, guardian. \$ Harry hissed at it. It dipped its head and swayed a little in satisfaction at being thanked (so unlike the usual students).

\$ You're welcome. Now, go! \$ Harry ducked inside the room before the wall closed up again.

The room he entered was small but every single wall was covered from floor to ceiling in books. A metal bar ran around the entire perimeter of the room to allow easy access to books even on the highest shelves. There was one section of wall that did not contain books and was instead home to a small fireplace just warm enough to heat the immediate area by it - which was to say, the sole leather chair and semi-circular desk. A tall black feather was sitting primly in a quill-holder - right where it had been left last time it had been used however many years before. A bottle of ink that Harry recognized as one of those expensive self-filling ones sat beside it, closed and kept meticulously clean of any excess ink.

The mahogany of the desk was complimented by the mahogany shelves and the rich colours of the thick tomes that surrounded it. The floor was covered in rich fur rugs mostly brown but containing black

and white and cream coloured ones as well in order to hide any of the cold stone from sight.

He took a step into the room but was interrupted by a dark warning hiss. He glanced over sharply at the source of the sound and stared at the long silvery thing that was waking from an ageless slumber.

The coiled serpent was twisting and twining on a large flat stone that was settled on a low table directly by the fire. It was easily five feet in length and covered in sleek silvery scales that shaded to deep ebony along the top of its body. Bright yellow eyes peeked out from within the twining silver mass and bright green flashed as feathery wings flared and the thing rose into as close to a sitting position a snake could get.

\$ Who are you to come into the Master's private room? \$ The Occamy demanded.

\$ I am sorry for intruding unexpectedly, Occamy. \$

\$ I am not an Occamy. \$ It interrupted Harry in annoyance. \$ I am a Coatl; one of the servants of Quetzalcoatl - god of rain and wind. At least, that is what I was originally. Now I am servant to the Master. \$

\$ Is your Master's name Salazar Slytherin? \$ Harry tilted his head to peer into the piercing yellow eyes of the Coatl before him. A line of spines along its back rose up in shock to reveal a bright line of green down its back and a crest of feathers coloured bright red and orange and yellow on top of its head. \$ I'm afraid that your Master has been dead for hundreds of years now. \$

\$ What of the young master? Surely the little one is not dead as well? \$ The Coatl was inspecting him with a glare only a serpent could pull off. It did not seem overly concerned that its master was dead and simply seemed to be digging for facts.

\$ The little one is dead as well. There are only two heirs to your Master left in this world: a half-blood by the name of Tom Marvolo Riddle and myself - through the curse scar he gave me. \$ Harry didn't actually know if this was true or not but it made logical sense if you

remembered that only descendants of Slytherin could speak with snakes.

\$ As if I care whether or not he is a pureblood. The point I need to know is if he already has a serpentine servant? \$ The Coatl was looking at him calculatingly. It was clear that the thing would prefer a direct blood relative but was willing to accept a magical heir if the position was available.

\$ He has a familiar named Nagini. \$

\$ Then he is taken already - by a female no less. That won't do for me. I suppose you will do as a Master. \$

\$ I should warn you that I have a familiar as well - an owl named Hedwig. \$

\$ That is of no consequence to me. \$ The Coatl looked at him. \$ As long as you have not accepted a serpent as of yet, I can bond to your magic without disrupting the connection between any other familiars you may have. \$

\$ Then do as you wish. \$ The Coatl rose up and flapped over to him, draping across his shoulder and staring into his eyes intently. Harry felt something press against his mental walls and dropped them warily to allow the Coatl access. It slipped through his mind with the ease of a duck to water and then withdrew. Its psychic scent now tasted a little like Harry and its eyes glimmered with knowledge.

\$ Quite a life you have lived. \$ It commented. \$ And your other form reminds me of my God - all electricity and storm. I certainly like you more than my Master before. \$

\$ Do you have a name? \$

\$ Of course I have a name. \$ The Coatl hissed at him as if it was a ridiculous question. \$ No one bothers to ask it, of course, as to give your name is to give your power. Although, as you are very close to my God, I would not mind terribly to give you the first part of my name, at least. \$ The Coatl bowed, tucking in one wing and outstretching the

other as its head dipped down and its eyes remained locked on Harry's emerald ones. \$ My name is Paladine. \$

\$ Forgive me for any offence but I have another question to ask before I give you my name. \$ Harry had been trying for several minutes to place whether the voice was feminine or masculine as serpent voices always held a little of both until you asked them. \$ Are you female or male? \$

\$ Female of course. \$ He could hear the musical lilt now that she wasn't hiding her gender from him. Yellow eyes softened in amusement. \$ A true familiar will always be your opposite. In ages past it was considered a horrible dishonour among magical folk to be without a familiar - it was seen as a type of disfiguration almost and many children were killed before they were introduced properly to society because they failed to find their familiar. \$

\$ I see. \$ Harry walked over to the seat by the fire and ran his fingers gently down the crest of spines along her back and head. She closed her eyes in pleasure and leaned into the soft touch while gathering the rest of her body up to drape across his lap like a blanket of silvery scales and bright feathers. \$ Tell me - Hedwig and I gained certain abilities because of our bond, is it the same for you? \$

\$ I have always had the ability to change into any form of reptile that I wanted. \$ Paladine responded. \$ But I have not done that in ages because my God and my Master never bothered to ask who my original people were. They were a magnificent race but were wiped out by a large meteor millennia ago. I am the only survivor and I took on this form to blend in with the other species near where I was awakened by my God's calling me. \$

\$ Why did you never offer this information to your God or your Master? \$

\$ Because they were never compatible for me to bond with. My God had a large Coatl named Cihuacoatl - Snake Woman, when translated - who he used to steal children and make them his followers. My Master had a horrible thing he called a Basilisk. \$ Harry remembered the purple-crowned thing he had slain and turned his

attention back to Paladine who seemed happy to be able to tell her story. \$ Her name was Aviana and she was disgustingly attracted to bloodlust and death - even for her breed. \$

\$ I assume that they were both given their names by their bonded. \$ At her confirmation, he continued. \$ Then where did you get your name? \$

\$ The rulers of my people were always named Paladine when they ascended the throne. I was the strongest in all of our recorded history. \$

\$ You say people and yet you are a serpent. \$

\$ That is because not all of my people could assume a serpentine form. Many of them remained very human-like with merely serpentine features. Human-like as in humans of today not of humans from when you were still little more than apes with fire. \$

\$ Can you still assume human form? \$

\$ I suppose I could if I were to rest and practise. I've been asleep for thousands of years - waiting for someone to break the spell on me. The closest anyone has come was when they called for the Master's servant to awaken and instead woke Aviana. \$ Paladine peered at him curiously. \$ I suppose that was the half-blood heir then? You don't look like the type Aviana would listen to in place of her bonded. \$

\$ It was. \$

\$ I see. I saw in your mind that you have slain her - this pleases me immensely my bonded. \$

\$ You are welcome. \$ Harry grinned at her as she twined under his fingers. His thoughts flew to Hedwig and knew the two would need to be introduced. \$ You must meet Hedwig. \$

\$ We already have met. When I dipped into your mind, I followed your link to her and introduced myself. She says that she thinks you would

do best to not continue gathering more familiars or she will refuse to deliver anything anymore but that she still loves you. \$ Paladine laughed a serpent's laugh. \$ I like her already. \$

\$ Great...first Legacy, then Hedwig and now you too. I don't think I'll ever find a female who doesn't insist on trying to train me. \$

Paladine just laughed at him.

Susan sighed heavily, trying to ignore the looks she was receiving but failing. She knew how her aunt and uncle and cousins had died, thank-you-very-much, and she'd gotten over it ages ago but now, with their murderers escaped from Azkaban, all the hurt was coming back. She felt a soft something brush against her leg and looked down at the golden fur-ball that sat there, staring up at her with intelligent amber eyes. "Oh Diodium." She murmured, looking down on her familiar that she'd met over the summer and still hadn't told anyone aside from her mother and her Aunt about.

Diodium tilted his head to one side, tufted tail flicking in annoyance at his failure to keep her spirits up. He was looking for a way to cheer her up now and redeem himself. She still wasn't sure how he was her familiar but even she couldn't ignore the tug of saddened curiosity that came from his link to her within her mind. She sighed a little and smiled at him, reaching down to pet his head and feeling him arch into the touch as over-large paws on her legs propelled him up to lick her face with his rough tongue before curling at her feet once more.

Diodium was allowed at Hogwarts only recently, under special permission from the Headmaster because of an old pureblood law that allowed exceptions for animals that were bonded familiars and not mere exotic pets (this was courtesy of Madame Bones's quick thinking and stubborn disposition). You see, Diodium was a lion.

Not just any lion though. He was a magical cousin to the lion - loosely related to a Nundu - and was considerably more intelligent than his non-magical brothers. When he was fully grown, his roar would be like a concentrated super-sonic boom and it would be capable of crumbling a boulder in one devastating blow. It was strange that soft spoken Susan Bones was the one to receive probably one of the loudest creature out there.

Currently, Diodium was just a cub (albeit a cub the same size as most dogs) but he would be pretty much fully grown by the end of the school year. His back was the same height as nearly her hip now! He was nearly fourteen months old and had been untimely driven from his pride when a new lead male came in and began to kill off the remaining cubs and had decided that the juvenile Diodium needed to go as well. He'd been rescued by a wizarding group devoted to the protection of wild animals and when Susan had gone to visit the research centre over the break the two bonded the moment he saw her. He'd hardly left her side since.

He'd only been delivered to the school two days ago and today was his first day out of the Hufflepuff dorms. He didn't seem to mind any of the magical things that happened around him - content on following his bonded around and keeping a careful eye on her - and she was relieved that he was adjusting. Of course, his coming to Hogwarts meant that she was now using the rarely used second fifth-year girls dorm - that was testament to a time when Hufflepuff had been a more populated house - as her dorm-mates hadn't been comfortable with a lion sleeping so close.

Susan didn't mind this in the least. She enjoyed having her own room and her own bathroom and it meant that Diodium could lay sprawled across the two beds that the House Elves had transfigured into a large cat-bed for him to sleep on. The House Elves had been the ones to insist that he begin to accompany her to class as he seemed fond of trying to eat them the moment he saw them try and clean the room. She'd agreed and today was his first full day of classes - drawing many looks from other students.

She looked up when Diodium growled warningly. Her eyes found Umbridge glaring at her and Susan felt her own eyes narrow in distaste. The woman couldn't try and force her to be rid of Diodium since she had special permission from not only the Board of Governors and the Headmaster but from Madam Bones and the Minister himself. Now matter how much Umbridge didn't like the dangerous cat being allowed to wander the school, her precious Minister had already given his permission and to revoke it now would be an insult against the Bones family and all of their subsequent

political ties (which included, much to Susan's displeasure and delight, the Malfoy's through a distant cousin's life-debt that had passed on to her mother upon her cousin's death).

The toad-woman left as quickly as she had come when Diodium yawned widely and showed off his considerably sharp fangs. Susan giggled at the sight and gently threaded her fingers through the growing mane around her familiar's head. He purred loudly in response to the attention.

"My, this is an interesting sight." She turned her head sharply to see Harry Potter standing there with a winged serpent draped across his shoulders. The silvery thing peered at her with yellow eyes and then peered at Diodium before returning to napping. Harry gave the serpent an affectionate look and then turned his emerald eyes back to the sight of her petting a lion. "Is he your familiar?"

"Yes." She replied, startled at his knowledge (she had been under the impression that he was muggle-raised). "His name is Diodium."

"A fine name." He nodded approvingly and gestured to the sleeping serpentine creature. "This is Paladine - a Coatl. I just found her while on a stroll through the castle." She blinked in surprise and confusion. "Strange, isn't it? This school is the reason I've found both of my familiars." He grinned at her wolfishly and sat down opposite her.

"Both?" She looked at him with an astonished look. Very few wizards nowadays found one familiar, let alone two. "So Hedwig is your familiar as well?"

"Yes." He smiled at the thought of the beautiful snowy owl. "She was my first present and my first friend and, as it turned out, my first familiar."

Susan thought about what it must have felt like to have no friends and then thought about how wonderful it felt to have a constant companion in the form of the purring lion beside her. She shuddered a little sympathetically and smiled gently at the dark-haired boy. "You are very lucky."

He smiled a faraway smile as he glanced at Diodium knowingly. "As are you. I pity those who go without."

"As do I." She shared a grin with him and then her face smoothed to a more serious one. "I've been meaning to ask you," she began, watching him turn from cheerful schoolmate to intent Young Lord in a second, "would it be possible for Diodium and I to train privately with you? Or for you to help us a little to learn to fight in tandem? I know you've never fought alongside a familiar before but you are an amazing strategist when it comes to battle and I just thought..." she shrugged a little and trailed off.

His eyes were sympathetic and knowing all at once. "You don't want to face these eyes more than once." He murmured. He glanced off to the side as a pair of third-years darted away before they were noticed spying. For some reason, she thought that he might have meant something else. Something to do with the electric fury that sparked in his eyes when he was angry and the Avada Kedavra green they could turn in a split second if he looked at you with enough of his magic loose. She met his gaze stubbornly, determined to not let the young Potter Lord to close himself off completely from all humanity. He smiled as if he knew her intent. "I'll help you if you help me." He gestured to the sleeping female on his shoulders. "Hedwig isn't a fighter but this one is vicious."

"It's a deal." She reached out to shake his hand and he smiled, shaking his head a little before he leaned across the table and kissed her forehead softly - the formal acknowledgement of a deal from a Lord of the family to an Heir of another. She was startled and pleased all at once and felt a blush rise to her cheeks at the same time as she felt his magic tingle where he'd kissed her and sealed the deal magically. "Lord Potter."

He grinned wolfishly at her. "Lady Bones. It was a pleasure doing business with you."

TBC...

Chapter#23

"Hm..." a voice hummed as the notice board was read lazily.

BY ORDER OF THE HIGH INQUISITOR OF HOGWARTS

Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach.

"...in accordance with educational...and the usual blather. She's getting a high opinion of herself, isn't she?"

\$ She is a waste of air, \$ Paladine hissed grouchyly. \$ She is unworthy of being above you, my Master. \$ Harry was unable to dissuade the ancient serpent from calling him by that title and so allowed her to continue as she pleased.

\$ I am still here, simply invisible, \$ she murmured softly. Harry nodded in response and met the rather confused stare of one Colin Creevy.

"Good morning, Colin," Harry greeted evenly, watching the younger boy's face light up in joy upon sighting his hero. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh yes! Good morning, Harry!"

Harry smiled wanly and tilted his head to one side. "What are you doing up so early? I was certain that I was the only one aside from my Lady in Ravenclaw who would wake up at this hour."

"Oh!" Colin blushed faintly and looked away. "It's just...I heard something strange coming from the common room..."

Harry surveyed the nervous youth. On one hand, it would be nice to have someone in Gryffindor who knew of Paladine but, on the other, he didn't think any Gryffindor in this generation would be able to put aside prejudice and accept that a serpent who had once served Salazar Slytherin himself had become his familiar. Colin met his gaze hesitantly and Harry felt something in him crumble. Colin was still a child, no matter what bravado he put up or his nerve in searching for

the right pictures. Never mind the fact that he was the same age as Ginny. A faint smile of genuine warmth flitted across the Walord's face and he motioned for Colin to join him at the seats closest the fire - a place that might as well have been a church for the younger male, considering the amount of time the Golden Trio had spent in the seats.

"Do you remember your first year at Hogwarts, Colin?" Harry asked as the other boy slowly sat down. Colin blinked at him in confusion at the rather odd question and Harry clarified for him. "Do you remember the rumours about me before you were petrified?"

"The ones that said you were the Heir of Slytherin?"

"Yes, Colin, those ones. Then you remember?"

"Of course!"

"May I tell you a secret Colin, one you will swear not to tell anyone no matter what is said or done?" Paladine shifted warily, sensing but not fully understanding what her Master was up to. Whatever it was, this young boy was going to become a part of it and she silently assessed him. There was a burning loyalty to her Master in the young one and so she approved of him for the sake of her Master.

Colin seemed to sense the seriousness of the question despite Harry's rather light tone. The beam on his face faded in intensity and he stared at his hero quietly and nodded. Harry tilted his head and smiled then. \$ Paladine, please show yourself to our young friend. \$ Colin jumped at the rise and fall of the hissing coming from the green-eyed male's mouth and pressed himself back into his seat when he registered the piercing yellow eyes staring into his own mere inches from his face.

He yelped then the winged serpent snaked (no pun intended) her head back and hissed at Harry. The elder male grinned and stroked her head. "She says she approves," he told Colin with a playful glint to his eyes. "Paladine, this is Colin Creevy; Colin, this is my newest familiar, Paladine."

"H - hello," the mousy-brown haired boy stammered out.

The Coatl hissed and bowed her head briefly. "She says she's delighted to meet you," Harry translated smoothly.

"It's nice to meet you as well," Colin managed to get out without stammering.

\$ Inform him that I will be staying with him on those times that I will undoubtedly be forced from your side, my Master, \$ Paladine hissed bluntly. Harry looked at her in surprise and she gave him the equivalent of a smile.

\$ I don't know whether or not to take offence to that. \$

"What type of favour?"

"When I am unable to take care of Paladine or when it is too difficult for me to smuggle her into my room for the night, I would like you to take care of her for me. She is mostly self-reliant but it is still better for her to not be wandering the corridors for her food with Umbridge on the prowl."

"Of course, Harry." Colin nodded solemnly. "Besides, I like snakes; I have a pretty black adder at home. She was mangled by a hawk but my mum had her fixed up and her venom removed. She's a veterinarian," he added with a grin. "Dad hates her but mum absolutely loves her and dad caved."

"Oh?" Harry was rather intrigued now and leaned forward curiously. "Does she have a name?"

"We named her Vipera, after the first part of her scientific name; mum never was very creative when it came to naming pets. Our last dog was named Fido."

Harry laughed and reached out to ruffle Colin's hair. The younger scowled at him and tried to make it lay flat, succeeding with far less fuss than Harry would have needed to put up. The green-eyed male

smiled and stood up, towering over the photographer. "Well, we must be off; I have an important meeting with a friend in Ravenclaw."

"Alright," Colin said as he stood up to return to his dorm to get ready for the day's classes. "See you, Harry."

Harry waved vaguely over his shoulder as he and the silvery winged serpent left the common room. Yellow eyes watched the younger with quiet intensity until the portrait shut her out of sight.

Su Chang breezed into the Slytherin common with a smug expression on her usually aloof and rather apathetic features. Her year-mates looked up at her entrance and scurried to be out of the way of the intimidating female as she made her way over to the elder Slytherin with whom she usually kept company with in her spare time.

"Su!" Felix Vaisey was a Chaser for the Slytherin house team but no one on the team liked him. He was appropriately Slytherin in public but he wasn't as dirty a player as they would have liked - being reluctant to harm the female players and unwilling to wear his wand in a holster for easy use like the rest of his teammates did - and in private he was entirely too happy, cheerful and friendly for all but a few of the Slytherins to get along with. Currently, his warm brown eyes were sparkling as he stared at the younger girl. "You're back!"

"I was at breakfast, dolt," she informed him curtly. He beamed at her shortness and pulled her beside him with one arm until she was forced to curl up beside him on the couch. "It's a wonder you ever got sorted into this house."

"Oh, you don't mean that." He waved off her words flippantly. "Now, what has my favourite little first year been up to lately?"

"I was helping Harry Potter get a book for some research," she declared flatly. Several upper classmen shot her looks but relaxed when they caught sight of who had said such a blasphemous thing; Su Chang was not known for helping anyone unless truly and utterly bored. Felix scrunched up his face as he considered the possibility of this being true.

"You're lying."

"It's true."

The two stared at each other. Frozen dark eyes met warm light-brown ones that were trying to probe and find the truth behind. His eyes widened in surprise when he failed to find even an amused flicker that meant she was teasing him. Draco Malfoy looked over sharply when the Chaser failed to burst into laughter. Felix must have noticed because he suddenly smiled a wide grin and laughed it off. Draco relaxed and returned to his homework.

Felix let his laughter subside and then leaned down to rest his chin on the younger's shoulder so that his whispers would go unheard and his lips were hidden behind the curtain of her hair. "You do realize what you're doing, don't you?"

She sniffed as if offended - which she was - at the implication that she was unable to judge and fully understand the situation herself. He placated her by pecking her cheek quickly and smiling gently. She sniffed again but this time she turned slightly so that she was tucked more comfortably against his side. He stroked her silky hair and smiled in contentment. Although she was only eleven and he seventeen, he had already asked if she would be willing to marry him when they had finished school. She had agreed, pending their parents approval.

It wasn't unheard of among purebloods to arrange marriages at a young age and, in fact, it had already been commented around their House that the pair made a wonderfully complimentary couple. He was cheerful and friendly and she was cool and aloof. Together, they were a force to be reckoned with and no one in Slytherin wanted to get either of the pair mad. Pansy had once insulted the younger girl and had found herself cornered the next day but a fearsome Vaisey with a rather hassled looking Draco Malfoy in tow who had explained on behalf of the Chaser that if Pansy were to ever say anything vaguely rude towards the younger that Vaisey would forget about his qualms about striking females.

This had been supported by most of the house - betrothals were not taken lightly - and Pansy, nor anyone else, had said a word against

the younger Chang since. Felix practically purred with pleasure as he remembered the incident and nuzzled against his soon-to-be-fiance's neck in affection. Su rolled her eyes but allowed it. Felix had sworn he wouldn't push her into anything in all his life and so she allowed him his delights every now and then - especially since he would be graduating at the end of the school year.

"Now..." he began imperiously, looked at her still smug countenance sideways, "what has you so pleased?"

In reply, she held up a carefully sealed envelope with two broken wax seals. He eyed it blankly for a moment before he put together the broken seals in his mind and recognized them for what they were. He lunged across her lap for the envelope she had held out of his reach. She let him snatch it just to watch with a smirk as his head collided with the wooden arm of the couch with a resounding SMACK!

He sat up, rubbing his head while still staring at the envelope with wide eyes. He pulled out the enclosed letter and began to read, eyes darting back and forth eagerly as they moved down the page. By the time he was done, his lips had curled and twisted into a grin so wide it didn't look physically possible. He whooped loudly, drawing the startled attention of everyone in the room and sprung up to grab her and swing her around while laughing in delight.

"What's wrong with them?" the whispers went.

"When isn't Vaisey insane?"

"Well, more insane than usual..."

"What's he got in his hand?"

"Looks like a letter..."

"Oi! Vaisey!" Marcus Flint towered over everyone as his voice rang loudly through the room. The Chaser ignored him as he proceeded to cuddle the first year against him and continued to laugh. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Our parents approved our engagement," Su replied for the both of them. She was currently petting the golden blonde hair of her new fiancé as he calmed down and nuzzled against her hair with all the enthusiasm of a puppy with his favourite toy. "He's just read the letter."

"Well," Flint crossed his arms and smirked, "congrats."

"Thank you." She tipped her head politely. At the approval from the feral Quidditch Captain, the rest of the house came up with broad delighted smiles and congratulated the couple. Felix was finally coherent enough to respond and did so with a sense of total and utter happiness that lit up even the dingy darkness of the dungeon.

For the Slytherins, who were ostracized by the rest of the school, any opportunity for celebration was welcomed with open arms. It had been a long while since anyone had officially been engaged without a betrothal since birth or any political motives and the entire house was soon planning a celebratory party for the pair who had managed to find a respectable marriage with someone they actually liked.

Su watched the planning quietly from within the arms of her fiancé. Felix had lifted her into his lap so that more people could fit into the circle of seats around the low coffee table and make plans. His arms encircled her firmly and she was pressed against the wall of warmth that was his chest as he hummed happily and nuzzled her hair affectionately. Occasionally, he threw out a comment about the upcoming party but otherwise the house simply did the planning for them.

Eventually the raised voices of excitement must have become loud enough that they could not be ignored for Severus Snape strode into the room with an imperious look fixed to his stern features.

"What," he drawled, "exactly, is going on in here?"

"Vaisey and Chang got engaged!" someone piped up cheerfully. The House chattered in excitement once more. The Professor waited for them to calm down before speaking again.

"Indeed." Snape looked down at the blonde as he beamed and tilted his head down at his petite fiancé who stared out impassively from behind the wall her future husband had made with his body. "Congratulations, Mr Vaisey and Ms Chang."

"Thanks, Professor!" he chirped in reply.

"Thank you for the sentiment, Professor Snape, sir," Su said in an even and coolly collected tone.

"Do try not to break anything," Severus turned on heel sharply, having completed his duty to his House. "Remember to change the password if you plan on inviting any other students to this party...not that I believe you would do anything so blatantly against the rules."

"Of course not, Professor Snape," the group chimed variously.

"Hn." He swept out of the dungeon without a backwards glance although, if anyone had seen his face, they would have seen a faintly amused smirk curling the corners of his lips upwards. Kirra was being surprisingly calm for someone who had, for all intents and purposes, lost her Warlord Prince. It wasn't even that she had lost the green-eyed male to another Queen or to a girl he fancied; it was that she had lost him to himself.

Harry had been fairly loyal to her and her family ever since his Birthright Ceremony. He had seemed to delight in the politics and the new world that had opened up for him upon his receiving the glinting Sapphire. His magic had changed to mingle the two different forms into something strange and exotic and beautiful unlike her own which had remained stolidly separate.

But Harry was not something she could control. She knew that now - had seen his web - and so she would step aside and let him live his life the way he saw fit. There were so many whispers in the Dark about him; so many dreams pleading for him to save them; this world, all of Earth, cried out for a saviour and the magic that was had chosen him. The very Earth itself had chosen the boy and magic would see to it that he was freed of all his bindings. It had started that summer by removing him from his family's house and sending him to

Kaeleer to be trained. It had continued to let him grow by allowing his magic to mingle with his Craft and his Jewel. She knew that his newest familiar - the Serpent-Woman-Who-Was-Still-A-Serpent - was yet another way to free him from his chains. She would not stand to have her Master be restrained in any way. Her old code would not allow the rightful Paladine of her people (even if she was the Paladine, he was her Master and held more claim to that title now) to be bound to the will of others.

Kirra knew that Harry deserved his chance to cultivate his place in his world and so she was gradually fading away from him. She went to her classes and learned this new way of magic - just as she had originally intended on doing - and she made friendly acquaintances with people in her own House. She still woke early every morning to train him in weaponry and Craft - helping him access the memories that her father had shared with him - but she had little to do with him otherwise. He asked for updates from the Lady Legacy and she brought the Kindred Healer Queen's words to him whenever she could. It seemed he liked the Queen because she seemed to understand that no matter how much she would like and no matter how much others teased him for it, he would not be a part of her Court. Indeed, nor any Court.

Besides, she had a new task to take on. The Abyss had charged her with a task that it was either unwilling or unable to give to Jaenelle. She had been weaving a shadow - the bit of magic that made it seem as if she had parents here on Earth - when something had sounded deep in the Darkness and she had found herself stuck in a trance and weaving an entirely new web. The web, when finished, was a strangely complicated thing for something with such a simple purpose. All it did was replay the same few words - the message from the Darkness and the Abyss.

Protect the heart's child. Do not let the child die for the child can not fade.

She did not understand the connotations surrounding this phrase. She knew that her mama, Jaenelle, was sometimes known as Kaeleer's Heart. The message did not specify any specific gender so it could have referred to either herself or Lucien. The second part

mentioned that the child couldn't fade. Kirra knew she would fade and become a whisper in the Darkness with only Witch to remember her. Lucien would, in all likelihood, become a Guardian and take up the mantle of High Lord (their father would not take up such a title - he was too devoted to Witch) to allow their grandfather to settle into his retirement without the annoyance of visiting Hell and dealing with its residences.

Which meant, if the child the Abyss spoke of couldn't fade, that it was speaking of Lucien. But her brother was uninterested in the affairs of Earth and only paid them any heed because he was interested in the bushy-haired female with the White Jewel. If it meant that the child shouldn't fade then it would speak of her. She had gone over the words a number of times, lingering on the can not fade and trying to decide if it meant what it said or what it implied. Of course, if it referred to a different heart altogether, then she was even more lost than she already was.

Kirra would have gone to her mother for advice but the Tangled Web she had woven had twisted in such a way that she was unable to speak, write, or in any way communicate its message to the blonde Witch. In desperation, she had sought out the advice of Luna Lovegood - a child who wandered through possibilities and time because of potent Seer blood - but the other Ravenclaw had simply smiled mysteriously and said that Kirra would do best to make sure that the child didn't fade if that was the task she had been set.

Needless to say, she hadn't been much help.

"Are you alright?" Harry's voice cut into her thoughts and she looked up, surprised to find his practice stick resting against her collarbone - a 'kill' in their spar. He had won while she had been thinking. Her eyes narrowed in distaste - this task was becoming annoying if it took her attention away from the training they were doing. "You've got something on your mind, haven't you? That's why I've got you like this." He stepped back and leaned against the stick, eyeing her carefully. "Daemonar will be furious if he finds out you let your mind wander away from the fights."

"I know." She sighed and felt her shoulders droop. "I suppose I'm just homesick or something."

He gave her a sceptical look but remained silent. It had been a few days since the bulletin with the new Decree - the one about restricting what professors could tell the students - had come out and the pair had found tension high and welcomed the burn of a harsh spar each and every morning. After the first tense day, Harry had suggested they go for a run around the lake as well and she had agreed. The chance to tire herself out made her less likely to lash out with her dark power and since she did not have a male to go to for comfort in this Realm as Harry did (well, he had a female - whether or not he knew that he had her...).

"How about we see what else your pretty new familiar can do?" She stood up abruptly when his stare became too penetrating for the young Queen. His gaze turned to the silvery Coatl-formed being that lay draped across the branch where Hedwig and a diligent Rex were also perched. Piercing yellow eyes gleamed as the green-feathered wings flared in preparation to join the humans.

"I suppose," Harry agreed. He tilted his head and hissed something in Parseltongue to Paladine and she gracefully dropped down and draped herself over his shoulders instead. "What do you want her to do?"

"I'm going to fire rapid bolts of power...a little under the power of the Opal," Paladine could break through or shake off power of up to and including the Sapphire though she would be disoriented after several strike of the upper portion. They'd found that the Opal was the easiest of all the Jewel powers for her to throw. She said it had something to do with the perfect balance of light and dark. They weren't quite sure what she meant but had been using power of that level in a series of tests to see what the serpent was capable of. "She'll dodge them and we'll find out how fast she is and how long she can hold that speed."

"Makes sense." Harry hissed instructions to his familiar and the serpent considered them before ruffling her wings and looking at Kirra expectantly. "She'll go when you say," he told her.

Kirra gathered power and drew it into a sphere of black energy in her hands. She sat down slowly and glanced at the serpent coiled to launch herself into the air. "Go!" A blur of silver shot into the sky at the same moment a bolt of black leapt towards the path the being tried to take.

Paladine saw it and green wings tucked in close as she flicked her tail in one swift move that made her seem to jump over the bolt. Wings flared and she drove herself higher as more bolts fired after.

Harry shifted as his familiar dodged and Kirra saw the pleased look on his face out of the corner of her eye. Her attention returned to Paladine when the serpent dove close enough to brush her wings against Kirra's head before high-tailing it back to the sky. Kirra ruthlessly sent more bolts after the serpent. She watched how the silvery Coatl-shaped being could throw her body higher by flicking her tail or how she could tuck her wings just so and make her upper body drop below her tail before either climbing back into the sky or diving rapidly down.

The birds on the tree seemed impressed with the aerobatic skills of the serpent and they watched her carefully, obviously filing away some moves to try out later. Although they were skilled hunters and exceedingly good at their messenger jobs, they weren't trained to be warriors. Paladine had come from a people who had decided their rulers through battle and she had been the last known ruler. She still was, as she was the last of her people. Apparently, Paladine had been leading her people in a war that they were losing and she, as the strongest in as long as her people could remember, had unleashed a maelstrom of magic against the enemy that had managed to wipe out nearly all life on earth (Harry had asked when this had happened and Paladine had given him a serpent-shrug and said she didn't remember when and that anything beyond a sense of total and absolute hatred and fury had been wiped out of her memory). The serpent had been powerful in her day and she hadn't forgotten all of her lessons.

Evidence of her training showed when she sacrificed a minor graze from one bolt to escape being hit in the head by another and possibly crippling her eyesight. If she lost her eyes or any of the senses that

originated in her head - hearing, smell, sight - then she was in more danger than she was if she allowed herself to get hit briefly.

There was a controlled violence in her movement as well. Each lunge out of the way looked to mimic a strike against some airborne enemy as well, even if her jaws remained closed. Several times, her jaws parted and fangs glistened as she hissed dangerously before diving out of the way and remembering what she was supposed to be doing.

Kirra felt the gathered energy in her hands fade and let the remaining power dissipate as the session came to a close. Paladine hovered warily before a soft hiss from her Master had her diving down to curl contentedly in his arms and eventually draping herself around his neck and allowing him to support her body and stroke her head affectionately.

"How did she do?" Harry asked curiously. For all his training in Kaeleer, he didn't know enough tactics to be able to tell if her aerial skills were amazing or simply average.

"She's definitely a warrior," Kirra told him with a smirk. "Everything she does is calculated to bring her enemy within range of her acid." The Coatl could spit acid if she so chose. It came from two bone protrusions, barely visible, at the corners of her mouth. The acid could eat through rock and was actually a very potent poison that had evolved and gained acid qualities. It was still a poison and, if you diluted it, it could actually be used without immediately burning through everything. Paladine could only spit it if she lowered her head below her wing-joint - it was a self-defence mechanism that prevented her from splashing the acid onto herself.

"I see." He smiled down at Paladine who hissed proudly. "D'you think she knows enough to help me train a friend and her familiar as well?"

"I don't see why not; she certainly must know enough tactics to dominate in every form she's taken." Paladine hadn't been able to remember how to change her form yet but she knew that, at one point, she had been capable of taking any reptilian form she wanted to.

"Good." Harry glanced at his watch and then to the castle with a frown. "We should be heading back."

"Oh," she said, having not realized how long they had been out, "have we missed much of breakfast?"

"Only about ten minutes," he replied. He looked at her curiously. "Do you want to go back now or stay out here for a few more minutes?"

"You can go," she told him, "I'm going to stay out here for a bit. Get some fresh air, you know?"

"Alright." He looked at her carefully and then turned his attention to Hedwig and Rex. "You guys should get going and enter the Hall the normal way. Paladine," he addressed his newest familiar, "you head back to the dorm and bug Collin to wake up and bring you breakfast - I've got a potions essay to research." He received various sounds of assent as the three launched into the air and faded into the distance.

Kirra watched him vanish his stick and leave after bowing faintly in her direction. She really hoped she figured out the meaning behind the Abyss' task soon - she wouldn't be able to stand if a barely trained Warlord managed to beat her trained-since-she-could-walk ass in a spar of sticks!

TBC...

Um...okay, just some replies to anonymous reviews that (as far as I remember) I haven't answered via any other form of communication ...

Vicki: thanks for the info - i'm not sure if i've gone back and corrected it yet but thanks for telling me!

xzcdxc: also, thanks for telling me the three long-lived races. I wasn't sure at the time and i'm still not sure if i've corrected...

Also, I would like to thank PsuedoAnonymous for the help with the revised edition. It's been a big help and I appreciate the feedback immensely. Without your help, the revised edition would not be at its best for when I am ready to begin posting it here on Which, admittedly, won't be until the original is done but still...THANK YOU!

- Alex, (Dark-Dragon-Chick)

Chapter#24

Susan Bones glanced with trepidation at the door of the Room of Requirement. Diodium flicked his tufted tail lazily as he remained sprawled on a warm rock formation that the room had provided him with. He certainly wasn't nervous about this first session with Harry Potter!

The room she had asked the place to make was a large one with various stone formations and statues littering the place. The ceiling was made of glass held up by long metal beams - the only indication that the ceiling wasn't simply non-existent - and the sun shone down brightly and subsequently heated the very boulder that her dozing familiar had settled on. The lion rumbled occasionally in pleasure but otherwise remained silent, breathing heavily in his sleep.

"Susan," Harry's voice greeted her and she looked over quickly and stood to greet him. He was dressed in casual robes (it was the weekend after all) but the lack of a uniform only made his presence more impressive. The mandarin collared robe was bottle green and sleeveless, reaching down to his knees but slit on either side up to his waist, with a boarder of blue-green she had sworn only belonged at Bondi Beach. He wore a slate grey shirt underneath this that brought out the warmer ivory colouring of his skin and black trousers. A black cloak with a silver clasp hung about his shoulders and came to the tops of his high dragon-hide boots. He smiled disarmingly at her. "Good morning."

"Harry," she returned with a smile, "you look very...regal."

"Regal?" His eyebrows rose and he tilted back onto his heels briefly. Paladine - who was sitting on his shoulder and looked remarkably smug with the colouring her human was wearing matching as it did to her wings - hissed something and he glanced sideways with a faint frown in the serpent's direction. "Well I should hope I have better clothes than Draco Malfoy; I was forced to go clothes shopping all day."

Susan giggled. The idea of the usually ragged looking Boy-Who-Lived being dragged unwillingly into clothing store after clothing store

was a highly amusing one. He shot her a mock-sowl, as if he could read her thoughts, but his eyes were laughing. Diodium sat up, startled at the sudden laughter from his human, and stared unblinkingly at the male in the room. The suspicion in the amber gaze was amusing to the humans but apparently Harry's familiar disliked it. The Coatl hissed and bared her fangs, flaring her wings to reveal the bright green feathers and the crest of spines all down her back rose in a flare of fiery brilliance.

Harry hissed something in amusement and the serpent glared at him. He smiled vaguely and then turned back to Susan with a more serious expression. "Paladine will be observing your, ah, Diodium, I think it was, and his natural skills in a series of tests." He listened to the lilting of his familiar's parseltongue for a moment before continuing. "Once we know what he can do, we'll find out more in-depth what you can do and then she'll think of the best way for you two to work together."

"What sort of tests?" Her familiar came and pressed against her legs and she pushed him gently to let him know that if he wasn't careful he could cause her to fall.

"Agility, magical resistance, strength and the like," he replied promptly. "Paladine is very old and very knowledgeable about training soldiers and their familiars." He folded his arms carefully and observed her for any hint that she did not believe that his familiar was capable of what he said she was.

Susan hurried to dissuade him of this thought and replied promptly, "You know what's best." He appeared pleased with this and relaxed faintly, tipping his head towards the silvery winged serpent and watching her launch into the air, dipping low above the lion and hissing at him until he followed her away to another part of the room. Harry watched them go and then turned to her. Susan abruptly found herself pinned under an intense emerald stare and froze. There was a strange darkness in those eyes and a wisdom beyond his few years. She suddenly realized that Harry, despite how he may have acted in previous years and in this one, was far more mature than most adults. He looked at her as if he knew precisely what would come of these arranged sessions before each DA meeting - as if, despite having no

previous experience in fighting alongside a familiar and sharing talents with it, he would still be teaching her rather than learning alongside her. It was a humbling feeling and she felt like shifting nervously under his stare.

Then he smiled and the feeling vanished. "Shall we go watch from a safe location?" The wall rippled and a spiralling stone staircase appeared, leading up to a stone balcony that had likewise appeared. He held out an arm for her to take and she did with a grin. He led her up to the balcony and waited for her to settle into one of the plush armchairs waiting for them.

Below, she could see Diodium staring up at the serpent that lay coiled and peering down at him from the top of a stone pillar. The yellow gaze swung up to Harry and his eyes glazed faintly as he listened to the soft hissing. He nodded and slipped his wand from his sleeve, waving it and muttering under his breath. A shimmer filled the air around the balcony before it faded. She sent him a curious look and he shrugged.

"She says she'll be using a stinging venom - it doesn't do anything but sting when it hits - but that she'd rather not let humans get hit by it. Apparently, the venom won't affect most magical beasts but it can easily burn human flesh."

"Venom?" Susan glanced down at the curled serpent who was idly observing her familiar as he puzzled the best way to launch himself to the top of the pillar. Her voice must have relayed her scepticism that simply biting a lion would let the boy's familiar win because he chuckled as if she had said something amusing and hastened to explain more fully.

"Perhaps venom isn't the best word...acid, I think, would be better. Paladine can spit acid - if you can see the bone spores near her mouth, you can see where it comes from - and as she's technically not a Coatl, even if she is masquerading as one, she has a multitude of venom and acid she can use. The mild stinging one is mostly used for catching prey from above." Diodium, apparently, had decided on a course of action as he leapt upwards, paws outstretched and wrapped them around the pillar.

Paladine hissed distastefully as the actually rather unstable pillar toppled, upsetting both familiars but mostly the serpent who was not granted the chance to launch herself into the air as quickly as she would have liked. Her wings flared to their fullest, surprising both humans who had not realized the full extent of the nearly seven-foot wingspan that she boasted, and powered herself forcefully into the air. The sheer size of her green-feathered wings made her long silver body look very small and the lion below her must have thought himself safe from the small creature taunting him for he dropped back onto his haunches dismissively looking around as if to find the real challenge.

Susan recognized her familiar's mistake and winced in sympathy at the agitation in the Coatl's sudden movement. She pulled her head back and hissed then dropped her head sharply below her wing-joint and spat a glob of brilliant red at the unaware lion. It struck him in the face and he roared and reared back shaking his head and pawing frantically at his face. She missed it but Harry frowned thoughtfully as he watched the lion growl before using a rock formation nearby to allow him greater height in his next attempt on the flying silvery beast.

This attempt failed miserably as Paladine soared away, dropping her head and spitting another glob of crimson at him. It struck his side and he jumped, whirling to inspect the stinging impact sight before he remembered his prey and looked around wildly for the brilliantly coloured creature above him. Paladine hissed loudly and Diodium looked over with a growl to the preening Coatl lounging on a small stone inlet on the wall. She hissed again the rise and fall making it clear that she was actually communicating to the other. Diodium bristled and fell back to his haunches, observing his previous prey distrustfully. Eventually, Paladine looked satisfied and launched into the air again, head dipping in preparation.

This time, when the glob came flying, Diodium leapt neatly to the side and then darted forward, low to the ground, to avoid a second aimed at the space he had previously occupied. Paladine reared back in something like delight and flapped to gain as much altitude as she could. Her head dropped and she spat. Diodium dodged the first but got hit again by the second and third rapid-fire strikes. Seeing that his

speed wasn't nearly enough to dodge every one of her strikes, the lion turned and ran - ducking behind stone pillars and darting under overhangs. The Coatl made a sound remarkably like a cackle and zipped after him. Her stinging acid came at a surprisingly swift rate.

Harry watched Diodium dodge and glanced down at his watch. Susan caught the look and saw his lips move faintly as if counting. After a moment of switching his gaze between his watch and his familiar he leaned over the edge of the balcony. "Alright, you cant stop now!" he called out.

The winged serpent backpedalled her wings and stopped in midair before wheeling to soar up to the two humans and coil about her human's neck. Harry grinned faintly and murmured something in parseltongue. Susan felt a shiver run up her spine at the strange affectionate croon in his voice. The only other time she had heard him speak he had been, apparently, annoyed and worried for Justin Flinch-Fletchley's safety.

"Why are you stopping them?" she asked as they descended the stairs. He glanced at her to respond but she was distracted by a tired Diodium coming up and begging for attention by rubbing against her legs. She obliged her familiar first; the poor boy wasn't used to so much activity as the lionesses had done all the hunting and real work in his old pride.

"Well, for one, I need to changed the room and prepare for our DA meeting," his eyes danced in amusement and she blushed a little having forgotten that he had scheduled a meeting for after his session with her, "and, secondly, Paladine and I have seen enough of what Diodium can do for one day."

"What...how do you think he did?"

"Aside from his abominable endurance," Harry translated easily for his hissing Paladine, "he shows promise as an...enforcer, I think, is the correct translation." He smiled a little apologetically. "I'm sorry; parseltongue has some phrases that don't quite make sense in English." Susan didn't know it but the word Paladine had used was a word that couldn't be translated out of parseltongue and was

pronounced, in as close to phonetic-English as Harry could manage, as Vissshavireass - with all of the s sounds hissed harshly while still pronouncing the soft sound made by the sh as it was said in English. It was an odd word and Paladine had briefly mentioned that it was also a class of warrior among her people and could double as a title after completing your training (or when you couldn't quite remember a person's name...).

The girl laughed lightly. "I see." Her eyes danced and she looked at her watch. Her brow furrowed faintly. "Oh dear...I'll need to hurry and get Diodium back to the dorm if I want to be here in time for the meeting."

Harry nodded silently and turned to the wall, watching as the stone rippled and wavered behind a haze previously only visible over intense heat sources and turned into the familiar bookshelves and books of the DA room, after bowing to her and murmuring a farewell. She fled the room quickly, anxious to make it to the dorm (that was in the basements - above the dungeons but below the main floor - while the DA room was on the seventh!) and back with time to spare in case she was trailed by some unsavoury character...Umbridge or some other who would delight in telling the horrible old toad of a woman about suspicious behaviour.

"Tell me about your people," Harry demanded tiredly. He was emotionally exhausted after the last DA meeting (shielding charms - a nasty thing in the wrong hands) and had further spent time in the Room of Requirement studying human anatomy and practising basic healing magic on whatever injured creature the room provided. All the spells were designed for quick use, as they were for battle and not healers, but they still required an intrinsic knowledge of how the body worked. Harry, who did not possess Hermione's love of book learning and was unable to muster up any caring emotion for the woefully too-perfect creatures the Room came up with, had a fair amount of difficulty but persisted stubbornly, eventually resorting to slicing himself open and working on that instead. The pain was a decent incentive to learn the spells.

\$ What would you like to know? \$ Paladine replied easily, peering down with bright yellow eyes. The beautiful silvery serpent was resting in her silken hammock that Harry had managed to fix to the

bed. The silk was red, just like the curtains, and a few selective notice-me-not charms ensured that no one would notice the addition of the hammock above Harry's pillow.

\$ What were they like? What happened to them? \$ It was easier to speak parseltongue if he could see the serpent but when he couldn't he usually needed to hear her speak first before he was able to - unless, of course, he wasn't exhausted as he was now in which case it was as easy as speaking English, regardless of whether or not he could see or hear a serpent.

\$ My people were a proud race, \$ she began fondly, \$ and we were well respected for our skill in battle. At least, we were at first. Long before I was born, our people began to weaken and our rulers began to rule for far too long as no one seemed able to obtain enough power to rise above previous generations. Paladine died naturally and weaker Paladine took their place. By the time I was born, almost no one could take serpent form, let alone another cold-blood. Imagine their surprise when a mere child managed shape-shifting of the like only possible by the first Paladine. \$ Her eyes glimmered in remembrance as Harry cracked one emerald orb open to stare at her.

\$ Each year there was a Pugnassregiusar, \$ Harry translated that roughly as 'royal battle' in English, \$ and I, curious, entered even knowing I could die. I destroyed everyone I came against - ate a few even - and when it was all finished I named myself Paladine; I was the Reginissa. \$ That last meant, rather obviously, 'queen'.

\$ What was your name before? \$ Paladine stared at him unblinkingly. He remembered what she had said at their first meeting about names having power and mentally slapped himself for forgetting. Before he could apologize, however, she was speaking again.

\$ My name was Parumydea, \$ she murmured, \$ but my closest friends called me Munym. \$

\$ It is a beautiful name, \$ Harry murmured reverently; recognizing what it meant for the serpent to give him yet another name. He held more power over her right now than anyone had ever held before and

she had a lot to lose if he decided to use that power against her - not that he would!

\$ Thank you, Master, but I have not gone by that name in millennia,
\$ she replied simply. Her eyes closed and her head disappeared from sight as she curled into her hammock. \$ I am tired; I will sleep now.
\$ It was as much a dismissal as the perpetually polite serpent would give and Harry obeyed the tremor in her voice that was filled with anxiety at giving him yet another of her names.

Harry waited until he could sense the tense coil of his familiar's magic unwind and relax before he hauled himself into a sitting position and swung his legs off the bed. His roommates were all busy elsewhere; Dean and Seamus were in detention for speaking too loudly in the halls about the unfairness of the recent Education Decrees (McGonagall had overheard and punished them before Umbridge could do anything about it personally), Neville was with Blaise and Ginny in the library researching their respective animagus forms, and Ron was in the common room with Hermione being bullied into writing an essay he'd left until the day before it was due.

He checked the time and noted that it was nearing dinner and everyone would head down soon enough. Perfect. That gave him plenty of time. He gently tapped the jewel on his trunk-ring and it trembled in response, jumping from his finger to the floor and transforming into its undisguised form swiftly and silently. He opened the lid and tapped the small panel to call up the third compartment. He brought out his wand and whispered a warning spell, adding on a location in parseltongue for greater accuracy, that promptly shot off in a tiny blur of red light to what Harry sincerely hoped was the bottom of the stairs to the dorm. Confident that he could get out before anyone entered the room and saw a strange trunk lying around near his bed. Normally, his trunk was under a glamour so no one noticed a difference but if he wanted to use a compartment other than the first, the glamour dropped and would not come back up until he switched back to the first compartment.

Harry climbed over the edge and into the trunk, feeling firm stone beneath his feet as he released his hold on the rim. When he looked up next, the stone ceiling was a good eight feet above him. The

duelling chamber was a massive place for a trunk so small - measuring fifteen feet high and approximately half the size of an American football field (not their 'soccer' - the other sport). Harry figured there was probably enough room for him to practice his animagus transformation.

Having failed to find a description of his other form in any of the books or documents that Su Chang had managed to procure from every source she had at her fingertips (including a request to her fiancé, Felix Vaisey, who was polite enough for a Slytherin when they had met), Harry had decided to try the change the old way. It would require a rather startling amount of so-called 'Dark' magics to locate his form and then make the change but he was fairly positive he could manage it. Ron would probably balk at the idea of Harry Potter using dark magic but Harry knew better than his ex-friend that this magic was only classified as dark because it caused the other form to become an entity rather than simply another shape. Harry would, essentially, create whatever creature he was and then have that creature live inside his mind. That had already started, as exhibited by the cackling presence that occasionally brushed against his senses and made him hyper-aware of everything around him, because of his recent deeper connection with his magic and it was very likely that his form could become a Legilimency weapon. The fact that he'd be required to undergo a blood-magic ritual helped with its classification as well.

Harry smiled faintly and walked towards the door separating him from the potions lab. He entered and immediately crossed to where a potion was simmering over a low fire. It was blood-red (unsurprising as his blood had been one of the main ingredients) and shimmered faintly. Inside that cauldron lay two blades of two knives - the handles of which Harry was almost finished crafting.

Snape had urged him (very secretly, of course) to read a particularly detailed book about how to craft your own set of all-purpose ritual daggers. You would need different daggers for each ritual, of course, but all-purpose ones crafted by the wizard himself could be used for the simpler rituals; the one Harry was going to do now, for example.

It had taken some time to gather the ingredients he would need but a letter to Knotjaw had the goblin eagerly plundering the Potter Family Vault for any and all dagger and wand crafting equipment. There was an extensive amount, apparently, and Knotjaw had explained they needed to recruit one of the younger goblins - who was gifted in aura reading - to come down and pick out the items that resonated the strongest with the magical signature still clinging to the letter. Whoever the goblin was, Harry was thankful he'd helped. Each item had tingled in his palm but only two cores and two stones had resonated and felt right for what Harry had in mind.

The two stones he had chosen were royal azel (reputed to help gain power to balance the physical body - perfect for helping to balance his magic to a second form) and black tourmaline (to ground his mind to himself so he wouldn't get lost in the transformation). The royal azel was a bright purple stone and it had taken quite a long time for the Warlord Prince to embed the thin strips he'd removed from the larger piece into the silver of the actual blade. He'd had to make sure that it would be in a place where it would actually cut his skin while still reaching down to where it would connect with the handle. The black tourmaline was more difficult as it hadn't felt right to Harry no matter where he tried to place it within the silver. Eventually, he'd found that it needed to be directly in the centre of the blade, surrounded on all sides with no chance of it actually cutting into his skin or touching his blood during the ritual, where it finally seemed to make his magic hum approvingly.

The two cores had been rather easy to find but were rather morbid and dark, even if they weren't compared to the light properties of the stones. The first, for the royal azel blade, was a small glass vial - hardly a centimetre in diameter - containing the blood of a lethifold (which of his ancestors collected that, he'd never know). The second, for the tourmaline, was a similar vial containing a sample of nundu breath. He'd quite nearly had a heart attack when inserting it into the handle - terrified it would break and he would die in his trunk - but he'd managed it after hours of frayed nerves. The hilts themselves were made of padauk - a wood with a reddish-orange hue to it.

Today, Harry would be sealing the hilt and the blades together and then performing the ritual. It wouldn't take more than an hour.

According to his reading, the animagus absorption ritual would bind his magic to any currently known forms (multiple animagus forms were rare); at least, the first stage of the three part set would. The other two sets of blood magic would allow him to, from the second part, borrow bits and pieces of his other form while he was human (after the first full transformation and animagus would never be able to make partial transformations again) and the final part would ensure that he would never need to preform the ritual again for any other forms he discovered. Harry doubted very highly that he would have more than one form and so was only planning on the first and possibly the second stages. Although, the first was intimidating and bound to be painful enough on its own.

Harry turned to his cauldron and carried it over to the sink (which flushed itself out magically into the nearest and safest place to dispose of any waste) where he carefully poured all of the potion out until the only thing left in the cauldron were the two glinting silver blades. He removed these with a flicker of Sapphire power (all of the books agreed, it was best to use as much of your magic around the blades and hilts as was possible during the creation process) and then summoned their respective handles over to hover in place beside them. He carefully lined the pieces up and then slowly inserted the tangs into their wooden hollows. He felt the magic around the two daggers flare and felt his own respond with a resonating hum. It took a sharp bit of concentration to wrap his wild magic around the two - helped by the guiding hand of his rather tamer Sapphire power - to seal the pieces together permanently. The result was a pulse of energy that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. The two blades floated down onto his work table and into the blood-sealed box they were to be housed in (crafted of the same chunk of padauk that the hilts were made of) and he approached them reverently - eyes gleaming in delight at the thrum of power that so closely matched his own.

The blades showed no signs of the focal stones they contained and gleamed with a blood-red tint in the firelight. He grinned and picked them up to feel the rightness of the blades react when he thought of the ritual he was to preform.

He returned to the duelling chamber - he'd spent the better part of his spare time enchanting it per the book's instructions - and quickly removed his clothing so that he was standing naked in the chamber (clothing interfered with the rituals stability). A silent flick of his hand had his Sapphire glowing and locking the trunk firmly to avoid any visitors. He felt the annoyance in Hedwig's mind when she realized he was beyond her reach (she could always sense whether or not he was accessible to her) and Paladine's link flared briefly as she sought out why he had locked the trunk. He sent reassurance along the two links and they subsided warily. He knew that somewhere above him an owl and a serpent were waiting anxiously for their human partner to return from whatever it was he was doing that they could not be there for.

Harry breathed out slowly, feeling the chill of the room and his anxiety over the ritual increase, in an attempt to calm himself. It worked but barely. He delved into the cool calmness of his Sapphire and then followed it until he reached his core. The difference between the power in his Sapphire and his core was astounding. The Sapphire was cool and calm and dark while his core was bursting full of life and death, shadows and light, a million different feelings all jumbling and crashing and twining together in an intricate dance of wild magic. It twisted through his limbs eagerly; ready for what it could sense was coming. The presence of his animagus shifted in excitement.

His magic felt strongest around the black tourmaline blade and he grasped it from the floor, slicing his hand open without flinching. Blood pooled in the wound and he cupped his hand to stop it from dropping to the floor. Carefully, with every bit of precision he could manage, he began to draw a runic circle on the floor. He was grateful the circle wouldn't have to be very large as when he was halfway through he could already feel his exhaustion increasing. Still, he needed to do this when he was at the point of total exhaustion if he wanted to be able to properly bind himself to his form; otherwise, his mental shields - instinctive and uncontrollable - would balk at the change in his magic's structure.

He finished the circle as quickly as he could and the wound on his hand sealed itself shut in preparation for the actual ritual. His magic reached out for both blades now and he levitated them up - following

the flow of magic to the area below his eyes warily. There, his magic urged him, cut there in perfect symmetry. He obeyed and held back his instinctive reaction to flinch or cry out as the blades cut through his skin like butter. Deeper. He obeyed and blood poured down his cheeks like tears. The knives travelled in unison down his face, never leaving his skin, and then down his throat - shallow, it warned, no death for this - to where his shoulders met his collar bone. They traced along to the centre of his chest, to his sternum, alternating in easy waves the depth of the cuts. From his sternum, they cut down to his stomach where they circled his navel, cutting across the other's cuts and then up at an angle across his chest to wrap around to his back and over his shoulders. They travelled down his arms from his shoulders, now on opposite sides of his body from where they had started. The blood leaked down from the wounds, staining the ground red and stinging horribly while making him weaker. Still, he continued on. Around, the magic wanted, a knot on the back of the hand - an intricate runic knot, around the wrist and back up the arm, the underside this time. He could feel his magic - both types - tracing along the lines, following the knives and somehow spreading throughout his body in a way he'd never felt before.

Almost... it wasn't his magic that time; his animagus was straining against invisible bonds to merge with him, just a little more...The knives reached his shoulders and then cut parallel to the first cuts, back up his neck and coming to a total stop directly beside the starting point. Harry could feel the accumulated magic lashing anxiously and he carefully, ever so slowly, let the knives leave his flesh.

The resounding surge nearly knocked him unconscious. Were it not for the indomitably electrifying presences of his animagus joining with him and filling him to the brim with energy, he was certain he would have dropped like a stone right there. His magic soared and dove and made the cuts glow bright gold as they began to seal over. He could feel the tingle of power in the air, the rumble of thunder echoed in his ears. He felt the cackle of lightning as it danced across his fur and then he felt his animagus and knew precisely what it was. The Raijin - the thunder demon - roared in triumph and their magics joined in an cackling bolt of pure energy that filled Harry with such a fierce joy and boundless freedom he nearly cried. Then, just as suddenly as the

change had come, it all vanished. The blood on the floor glowed and shot towards him, following the lines of the healing cuts and being reabsorbed by his body - completing the ritual and robbing Harry of all his strength.

He cried out now, after all that, and his trunk flew open under the combined terror and fury of his two familiars. Paladine reached him first, her body twisting and curling and sliding under his head before it could hit the stone floor, and she hissed in realization and utter fury for not recognizing the signs of his intent sooner. Hedwig screeched, making his ears ring, and scolded him harshly for not telling anyone.

"Cold," he croaked out. His familiars went silent and listened to him intently. Hedwig flapped to the side and retrieved his outer robes, dragging them over with powerful strokes of her wings and carefully draping it over him as best she could. "Thanks..."

"You stupid, stupid human! What were you thinking? No, wait, you couldn't have been thinking because if you were you would have never done such a stupid, stupid thing!" Hedwig's worry drowned their link and Harry tried to comfort her but she was having none of it. "No! Never again! I will never again leave you to your own devices; you simply cannot be left alone without supervision! Every time I leave you, you go and get yourself hurt or nearly killed!"

\$ I agree with the owl, you shall never go anywhere without one of us. Do you understand, Master? Never. \$ Paladine fixed him with a furious look - fangs bared and everything. It made even Harry flinch away and he'd gone up against an angry Basilisk. \$ If you cannot be trusted not to get hurt then we will simply have to make sure you are not left to think up such idiotic human ideas. \$

"Yes, precisely!" Hedwig agreed quickly. "And if you do not listen to reason we will go the the red-furred female and have her knock some sense into you!" Paladine's head nodded in approval and Harry felt a horrible blush reach his cheeks at Hedwig's referral to Ginny Weasley. He did not want the female to find out about his blood and mind magic studies.

"I swear I won't do this again - not without letting you be here to watch me," he felt Paladine and Hedwig feeding him their own brand of natural magic to keep him awake. The Raijin shifted anxiously until it felt Harry's recognition that the presence of the two were safe. "Now, please help me get out of here and into bed; the blood magic will settle much more quickly with sleep."

His familiars agreed - sleep was best - and they brought him his pajamas and continued to feed him energy until he was under his blankets safely. They withdrew from his mind and he and his exhausted animagus form fell into a deep sleep.

TBC...

Chapter#25

The first thing he noticed was he hurt. Not so much a hurt like a fall from a broom or a sharp strike from one of the sparring sticks but the slow endless ache like regrowing bones. His eyes protested the meagre light that filtered through his closed eyelids and everything seemed unnaturally loud. The sleeping breaths of his roommates were harsh and grating on his nerves. His sense of smell was oddly powerful and the scent of unwashed laundry and wet shoes - particularly nasty because they were being heated in a vain attempt at drying them - assaulted his poor nose.

A soft whine escaped his throat unwillingly and something above him shifted noisily. He winced and the sound abruptly halted. There was an odd tingle of magic and the offending sensations that had been plaguing him were cut off abruptly. He still ached, however, but it was more tolerable now. A soft sound, this time it didn't hurt to hear, reached him and it took a moment before he realized it was parseltongue.

\$ Master? Master, you must wake up now! The blood magic has set in and you need to use it before your magic will settle. That is what is making you hurt. \$ Paladine was worried, he could tell. She had lived a long time and had probably seen many such rituals as he had just done; who was he to question her logic?

With the persistence only a Potter could manage, he hauled himself upright. Sharp bolts of pain danced down his chest and arms and even his neck. Even his face felt sore. He brought up a hand and paused, puzzling over the unmarked skin. He hadn't realized that he wouldn't be able to see the marks of the ritual. He'd even come up with a list of different ways to disguise them.

\$ The marks will not show until you call them, Master. \$ Paladine sounded amused. He looked up at his serpentine familiar and she stared at him knowingly. \$ Incidentally, what is your new form, Master? \$

\$ A...Raijin, \$ he managed carefully, his neck throbbing with the vibration of his voice, \$ a thunder demon native to Japan. There are only a handful of them left in the world. \$

\$ Hedwig will be pleased, \$ Paladine commented, eyeing her human tenderly. It pleased her whenever her bonded did something to make himself separate and unique amongst the common other wizards around him. It pleased Hedwig when he did something to ensure his own safety and not another's; a formidable thunder demon as an animagus form would undoubtedly curb the owl's remaining temper over their bonded's fit of unsupervised human stupidity.

\$ Yes, she will, won't she? \$ Harry got to his feet and pulled back the hangings, dispelling his familiar's privacy spell. Neville looked over from where he had been tying his shoes. Hazel eyes flickered over the form of his friend warily, recognizing the blood magic almost instantly (he was a pureblood and had been taught to feel that particular magic when he was very little). It worried the boy that his friend had dabbled in such a dark art but he would reserve his judgement until the other explained his reasoning.

"What ritual did you do?" he asked softly so as not to wake the other sleeping boys. Harry froze in the process of buttoning up his dark green shirt and shot Neville a silencing look. Neville felt something pressing against his mind as a familiar voice floated through his head.

/ Not here. / After a moment, the wizard continued his previous task under the waiting eye of his roommate sitting on the bed across the room. Neville waited for him to finish before getting to his feet, following the emerald-eyed boy as he led them down the stairs and out of the Gryffindor Tower. Harry could feel Neville's earth Affinity testing his lashing magic and balking and bristling at the blood magic that now twisted and twined its way around his core. He smirked faintly, amused and unreasonably pleased that his friend considered him a threat.

He paused when he came to the odd statue of a gargoyle he had found in his second year while exploring the seventh floor. The ugly thing was frozen in time making the same disgusted yet mildly amused face at everyone who passed by it. Nobody came down this

corridor as the only place it led was to the massive gargoyle at the end. Harry figured it was the safest place to speak without being caught or overheard. There was something about the glare of the gargoyle that frightened people away and, indeed, Neville glanced at it nervously even as Harry slumped to sit at its stone feet, just within the protruding curl of its stone wings. Neville slowly took a seat in the alcove of a nearby window, looking at Harry slightly jealously for managing to make a slump seem graceful. Harry shrugged mutely in response to the look; he'd been drilled on such behaviour by Daemon and Saetan and he wasn't about to forget about that training - especially not if he was ever to stay with them in Kaeleer again.

"So...how did you know?" he asked eventually, pinning Neville with a piercing look. The other boy shifted nervously and Harry carefully drew in the lashing magic around him so that it stopped prodding at his friend.

"My Affinity told me so," Neville explained quietly. "So...just what were you doing meddling around in blood magic anyway?"

"Ah," he uttered a soft sigh, realizing the cause for Neville's sudden concern and lack of backbone; the boy was worried that Harry had done something horribly wrong. "The first of a three stage animagus absorption ritual."

"Oh!" Neville blinked as though surprised that Harry would actually give up such information. Harry watched Neville as the other struggled to drag up what little he would have been taught about such things. Understanding flashed across the expressive hazel eyes and Harry grinned as Neville muttered to himself about not thinking of such a thing sooner. "So do you know what your form is now?" he asked with genuine curiosity.

"Yeah." Harry grinned and replied with a note of smug male satisfaction flavouring his voice "A Raijin."

"A Raijin? Those are really rare...and really dangerous." Neville peered at him curiously and then narrowed his eyes. "Have you activated it yet?"

"Not yet. I was planning on activating it now though; no one else is really awake at this time and the Room of Requirement isn't far off." Harry glanced sideways at Neville. "You're welcome to watch, if you want."

"Alright," Neville agreed easily and stood up, waiting for Harry to stand up. Neville glanced over almost nervously as they began the walk to the Room in silence. "Ah, did it hurt much?"

"It wasn't pleasant," Harry said slowly after considering the question for a while. "You'd need to make your own knives and getting ingredients that feel right are incredibly hard if you don't have access to your Family Vault like I do." He smiled apologetically but there really wasn't any feeling behind it; he'd rather not encourage his friends to go through such a ritual and face the stigma of being declared 'dark' if anyone found out. He could handle it as he was already considered alternately crazy or a Hero of Heroes. Neville, as an openly shy Gryffindor, would not be able to face such a thing as easily - even if he wasn't as shy as he led others to believe.

Neville smirked, an odd expression to see on his face but one that Harry was rapidly become accustomed to. "I wouldn't do the ritual myself but I'd like to know what to expect if I, for whatever reason, did decide to."

Harry snorted and Neville laughed. They both knew the Longbottom Heir would never do such a thing and that the question had only been to determine if Harry had actually known what he was doing; to ensure that their red-haired female friend would have no real reason aside from worry to complain if she ever found out. Neville may have been Ginny's best friend for a while now but even he wouldn't back her up if she was in the wrong of her own accord. He'd stay with her, yes, but he wouldn't agree with her and back her up.

The familiar tapestry of Barnabus the Barmy came into view and Harry paced three times in front of it. Neville grinned faintly as stone door appeared across the corridor and waited for Harry to enter before following after.

The room was not actually a room but an open field with mountains climbing to the skies. Coniferous trees scattered all over, their needles and seedlings scattered all over the ground and the rocky precipice that Harry and Neville emerged onto from the stony door embedded on the side of the mountain. The sky above was grey and threatening but the rain hadn't started yet. Harry observed this with a look of intense satisfaction and curiosity.

"Are you ready to go now?" Neville ventured impatiently, glancing at his watch and noting it read (it gave little messages depending on the time and Neville's schedule) 'almost time for normal people to be awake' cheekily. Neville shook his head faintly and glanced at Harry who had apparently satisfied his curiosity over how high up their precipice and field actually was. From the delighted glimmer in the emerald orbs, Neville figured they were somewhere between really high and really damn high. Neville didn't think Harry was entirely sane when it came to heights.

"Yes, I think so." Harry smirked faintly and turned away from Neville and the door. Black lines sprang up on the pale skin as the blood magic activated at a thought from Harry. The black of the lines glowed in a way that somehow absorbed the light around it while still giving it off and Harry grinned as he felt the Raijin join with his body. The thunder demon howled in delight at the sight of the thunderclouds above them and Harry felt his magic surge as the body to match his new electrical magic began to take over his inadequate human one.

He felt his bones shift and reform as he was forced to his hands and feet. Blue-silver fur began to sprout all over his body, absorbing his dark hair until it had vanished and melding into his clothes. His face elongated to become an odd mix of feline and lupine qualities. His ears were long and covered in clumps of fur much like a lynx only erratically so. A huge ruff like a lion's mane of fur surrounded his head and stretched down his back to his tail which was long and whip-like but covered in sporadic chunks of fur. Harry felt something hard grow on his forehead and wondered what it could be but then lost interest when he caught sight of the gleaming ivory claws that curled in and out of his paws like a cat's. He grinned ferally, feeling his long fangs grow. The change was only completed when a jolt of

electricity lit up his body in a blue-white light and made all the odd clumps of fur stick out permanently on end. The change had felt like it took forever but it had only taken a matter of seconds.

"Woah," Neville's voice was low and properly amazed. Harry turned to him and delighted in the smooth feel of his form, easily plucking knowledge from the Raijin on how to operate. The beast was sleeping within Harry's mind - unable to operate but to give Harry its instincts while Harry was in charge of the body. He flicked his tail - a dangerous looking thing with fur like long needles - and waited for a proper explanation of what he looked like or, more importantly, his distinguishing feature. "Ah, there it is!" Neville exclaimed after a long moment of scrutiny, pointing to where Harry had felt something hard grown on his forehead between his eyes. "You have a blue jewel here on your head with a green lightning-bolt mark in the centre. It's hard to see but it's there."

Harry growled and promptly sunk to the ground, pillowing his head in his front paws in a blatant sulk. Neville grinned at his friend even when Harry pinned his ears back and yowled at him, sparks leaping along his body in response to his irritation. Harry briefly wondered if it was possible to turn into that bolt of pure power that he remembered from his first transformation with the potion but promptly realized that it wouldn't be. He was still tired and the Raijin was sleeping. Unless provoked, it wouldn't be possible.

"Breakfast is starting soon," Neville commented. Harry glanced over from where he had been contemplating the distance between himself and the large boulder on a smaller precipice nearly thirty feet away. At a length of about nine feet excluding the tail, Harry weighed easily over eight hundred pounds; all of it was muscle and energy. The jump would have been a piece of cake for such a beast. "You're bound to be hungrier than normal - your form is much bigger than the average Raijin that I've heard about."

Harry activated the magic again and changed back into himself. The Raijin woke up and announced it was hungry before receding into his mind where it would remain unless he was in danger or woke it up himself. "What color are my eyes?" he asked immediately. He liked

his eyes - so like his mother's - and would be disappointed if they weren't green.

"Red," Neville replied and Harry was disheartened just as he had predicted. The thought of food perked him up and he smirked at his friend. "I said you'd be hungry."

"Oh shut it, let's just go eat." Harry sulked the whole way down to the Great Hall (encountering Paladine on the way who went invisible and lounged on his shoulders). Upon arriving, he promptly went silent as his eyes flashed as an intensely familiar yet alien sensation swept up his spine. Oh wonderful...

Ginny was confused. She had been awake early and had been surprised to find Neville had already left the dorm. Harry was gone too, apparently. Her heart had clenched - berating herself silently for ignoring the emerald-eyed male for the past week or so. She had been so caught up in the joy and thrill of having something that none of her family did that she had totally forgotten about her promise and her own resolution to help the male. She had resolved to sit with him at breakfast and had taken several shortcuts to the Great Hall in order to catch up with him. She had been confused to realize that he hadn't even come down yet and wondered what on earth could be taking him and her best friend quite so long to get down.

Blaise had come up from the dungeons shortly after her arrival. He looked particularly handsome in the amber silk shirt and midnight blue slacks worn beneath an open-front black robe. His dark skin looked rich and his eyes had glinted as he observed the table at large. He had then chosen to smile down at her, causing nearly every female and several males within her seat to swoon at the rare look from the Zabini heir. "Good morning, miss Weasley," he greeted smoothly, ignoring the teasing smirk she was sending him for the state of her peers. Privately, she could see that he was amused behind the glimmer of annoyance. "Have you seen Longbottom this morning? We have a project together that I'd like to get started on." It was a blatant lie. Neville and Blaise didn't share any classes together except potions and Care of Magical Creatures and those were two classes pretty much guaranteed not to give assignments outside of class. She continued to smirk but the teasing had turned knowing and

the dark-haired male faintly glowered at her for the silent insinuations. The two casual-partners were certainly getting close.

"He'd already left when I came down," she informed him. "He should be here soon."

"Good. Thank you." He took her hand and kissed the back of it gently - a perfectly mocking gesture he managed to make look utterly non-threatening while incredibly intimate - before crossing the hall to take his place at the Slytherin table. There were a few wistful sighs and Ginny noticed that Umbridge was giving her an appraising look. She ignored it; the woman didn't quite know what Ginevra Weasley was up to and her acceptance of Slytherins and Purebloods didn't mean a thing like what Umbridge was taking it as.

Across the hall, the elder black boy had caught the calculating look the DADA professor had sent his youngest friend and narrowed his eyes. There wasn't a single chance in hell that Blaise Zabini would ever agree with the Ministry; there was a zero percent chance of Ginny agreeing with them as well. He would be very sure to keep an eye on his pretty red-haired friend for the next few weeks.

So, Ginny was confused. Neville hadn't come down either. Which meant, logically, that Harry and Neville were together somewhere. She ran through her mind as fast as she could, wondering why but came up with nothing. The sound of the Hall door opening caught her attention and she flicked her cinnamon gaze over. Harry had entered with Neville and had frozen in the entrance way. His previously playful sulk had vanished and turned stony. Neville glanced at his friend warily but was distracted when he caught sight of Blaise getting to his feet and gliding over.

Blaise bent over to whisper something into Neville's ear and the other flushed faintly as he watched the Slytherin breeze out of the Hall with all the wolf-like grace that only a Zabini could manage. Harry, she realized with a start, was now staring at her intently. Something odd and strained was in his gaze and he quickly took a seat a fair distance away from her. Neville looked confused and surprised and she met his stare questioningly. He shrugged and made a brief motion while smiling apologetically.

She understood; Neville would sit with him and try and figure out the problem. She continued to watch him, however, and puzzled over some rather odd behaviour he exhibited randomly while conversing with her best friend. A whisper of something utterly familiar made its way to her in a brief lull in conversation at the table and she tensed.

Her eyes narrowed upon the air around his neck as she strained against the noise around the table to hear the soft sounds that no human could have made. Parseltongue?

"He's got a serpent around his neck, that's for sure," Tom murmured inside her mind. He had come up to listen and stretching his little magic out to enhance his 'hearing'. The male was as curious as she was but not as worried. "She's got an odd accent though and I can't place it."

"I didn't even realize snakes had accents," she grumbled back, wishing he would be quiet so she could hear what he was able to. Since when had Harry got a snake? Surely she hadn't been neglecting her friendship with him for that long!

"Just the same as any human," Tom was explaining with a hint of amusement at her distracted thoughts. "All the ones you've met have had familiar accents though so you haven't noticed much difference. I once met a boad from Africa; she had the most beautiful little purr to her voice..."

"Oh shut up, Tom," she finally snapped at him. His presence took on a pouting air and she ignored the invisible puppy-dog eyes asking for forgiveness (how he managed that she'd never be able to explain but it worked and she usually caved when he sent them to her, however, her concern was too great this time). Her concern was for Harry who now looked strained around the eyes and very stiff in his seat. In fact, every time someone moved near him his eyes would flash and he looked to have to restrain himself from lashing out. "There's something wrong with him."

"You mean besides a two-way link with my older self's delusional mind?" came the sarcastic drawl.

"No, I mean seriously. Look at him, Tom."

She felt him rise up and slip in behind her eyes. She focussed them on Harry, watching as he nearly snarled at a second-year who'd bumped while walking between the tables. Neville laid a calming hand on Harry's arm and the other jerked back, eyes wide. Neville murmured something and frowned and Harry murmured something in returned, looking mildly ashamed for his reaction. Tom withdrew easily after deciding he'd seen enough and settled back into her mind pensively.

"I don't know what's wrong with the boy, Ginevra." The only reason she let him call her that was because she didn't like the way he said Ginny - it reminded her too much of the Chamber. She glowered in annoyance and then felt her anger drain into worry and depression for not knowing how to help her close friend. Tom shifted anxiously and finally muttered something in an attempt to make her happy (though he would later deny it when asked). "Perhaps you should ask that Kirra woman; she seems to know quite a bit about your young friend's condition."

Ginny nearly smacked herself, earning a strange look from Hermione across from her (when she'd come down, Ginny didn't know). Of course! Kirra would know exactly what was wrong with the Warlord Prince! The red-head got to her feet and hurried over to where Kirra was hunched over a copy of the Quibbler with Luna. The two were staring intently at an odd picture of a swirling mass of colours. Luna's dull eyes lit up and she pointed excitedly to something. Kirra bent closer and squinted then shrugged a little, gesturing to another portion of the picture. Luna frowned thoughtfully and nodded before returning to her intent staring.

"Kirra," the blonde looked up at Ginny's voice, "there's something wrong with Harry."

The older girl looked over at the Gryffindor table briefly and her eyes widened. "Oh, dear," she murmured faintly. "That can't be good."

"He looks a little frustrated to me. Maybe Ginny could fix him up," Luna commented airily. Ginny furrowed her brow - unable to get a meaning out of her friend's rather toneless voice. Tom felt as if he were hovering between amusement and indignation. Kirra shot Luna a look of mingled exasperation and amusement before rising imperiously and nodding reassuringly to the red-head.

"I'll take care of him, don't worry," she said firmly. "Just...you remember my supply of shadows? The ones I hid in your trunk?" Ginny nodded slowly. She remembered the odd brass spheres that could take the shape of a person and fool most wizarding folk. "I need you to take one of the ones marked with a lightning bolt," Ginny's attention sharpened at that statement, eyes narrowing as she realized the implications of that symbol, "and put it in Harry's bed; somewhere it won't get knocked away carelessly."

"Where are you taking him?" she demanded quietly. It was obvious this was something that had to do with Harry's status as a Warlord Prince. Kirra's icy blue eyes looked pained as she stared at her younger friend. Ginny felt no sympathy for the girl who was keeping secrets about one of her newest and closest friends. She stared at her intently, pulling all her annoyance and fury and putting it into her gaze until Kirra flinched a little.

"He's done something to bring about a change earlier than expected. It's not a bad change but it is a troublesome one. He needs to come with me to Kaeleer to see my family. They can deal with him best - they've had to do the same thing at least a dozen times each with my brother and cousin."

"What is it though?" Ginny asked with a hint of desperation. Tom shifted uncomfortably as her emotions rattled her mind and mental walls. She reinforced them hastily and he relaxed fractionally - even taking on some of her excess emotion to help calm her.

"This, Ginny Weasley, is what the Blood like to call the rut," she smiled in a strained sort of way, "and the rut is precisely what it sounds like."

The only thing Ginny could think of when she heard 'rut' was the time of year when the bucks clashed antlers and fought for hinds to fill their harems. She silently questioned Tom and he came up with a blank. The red-head glanced at the blonde questioningly and Kirra nodded solemnly in response. In that case...oh dear was right. Ginny shot Harry a look and then turned back to Kirra with a sense of determination to help her friend. "Alright. You'll keep him safe?"

Kirra smiled widely. "Very safe. Now hurry!"

Saetan glowered at his granddaughter as she stood across from him unrepentantly with a Sapphire jeweled Warlord Prince on the cusp of the rut just behind her. Of all the things to bring back with her, this had to be the one she chose.

"And why couldn't we have just gone to his school?"

"He's gone and done something that anchored his magic to his blood and mind and I'm worried that he'll unleash it upon the students. To us, he's just a Sapphire in rut; to his world he'd be a threat to their security and a danger to all of society that needs to be extinguished before it can cause any permanent harm."

The boy, his ward, looked surprisingly tame for a Warlord Prince about to go into the rut. Saetan was impressed. The green eyes stared blankly ahead of him and occasionally a low rumble worked its way around a human throat before falling and going silent. Saetan gaged the power the younger had at his disposal and figured it wouldn't be too much hassle to take him to one of the empty islands in Hell and turn him loose.

"Alright, I'll take him."

"You sure you don't want help? At least get Uncle Lucivar; Harry's stronger than you think but even he can't do any harm if he's unconscious."

"With all due respect, High Lord," Harry began through clenched teeth from behind Kirra, "I may not be a handful in this form but I do have another that is quite nearly the same size as an Arcerian cat." Saetan turned to his sometimes-ward and eyed him carefully. He

hadn't been aware that the young teenager had managed to learn how to take on a different form... It certainly changed things, that was certain.

He nodded to his granddaughter. "Send for Lucivar. We - your uncle and I - will take care of him. I trust you have made the appropriate arrangements at school...?"

"I've left one of mother's sort of shadows in his place and a temporary one in mine - we're lucky it's the weekend. He goes missing often enough and, with his recent separation from the rest of the 'Golden Trio', no one will think it odd if he doesn't quite act the way he usually does."

"Good." Saetan turned to Harry and eyed him critically before reaching up and tugging his Black out into full view of the Sapphire Warlord Prince. The younger glared harshly but the expression rapidly faded into one of resignation with mingled relief. It was easier for the teen to control himself and his raging instincts when the only male nearby he could challenge was one so obviously stronger than him. Even he, reckless as he was (even if he had learned to control that), wasn't fool enough to test the patience of a Black Jeweled Black Widow Warlord Prince. Add to that, the knowledge that an Ebon-Grey Warlord Prince was also coming? Harry was obviously very much relieved that someone was with him who could control him in the absence of a proper Queen.

Warlord Princes needed servitude or at least a female to tie themselves to. Harry, being from a place where his only real female companion was the one he also wanted (whether or not he knew this yet, Saetan wasn't sure, but he could tell the boy was falling for this Ginevra Weasley), didn't have this. Kirra was alright for day-to-day worries but for something as nerve-wracking as the rut...? No. Even a Black Jeweled Queen wasn't enough for the Warlord Prince if he wasn't bound to her beyond their own polite obligation and tentative friendship.

They could have called Legacy in and, in all honesty, they probably would nearer the end of his rut. The first rut was always blissfully short, Saetan knew. For this, he was grateful and he sincerely hoped

that Kindred Queen would come and hold onto Harry's 'leash' while he rode out the violence and raging emotional storm.

"Follow me," he commanded quietly. Harry growled faintly but followed nonetheless, leaping into the Winds and joining Saetan on the way to one of the protected islands the SaDiablo family had equipped for ruts. The younger seemed to calm as they soared through the twisting and twining Wind and Saetan smirked faintly. It seemed that Harry hadn't been lying when he'd said he loved to fly. After all, how often had something as simple as riding the Winds been able to take the edge off of the rut? Never, that's when.

Of course, there were always exceptions, it seemed, when it came to Harry James Potter.

He was away now, apparently safe from harm, but now his temper was rising in great spikes of power. He could smell the other males and the strength they had; he wanted nothing more than to destroy them. The Raijin was tired from the initial transformation so Harry had complete control over the body and the change came in a flash of white-hot light. The massive cackling lightning beast roared and the clouds above echoed the thunder in his roar softly in comparison.

He could see Saetan standing nearby, unflinching and unaffected by the display of power. It made his blood boil angrily and he roared again, slamming against the Black barrier with every bit of strength he could manage. Lucivar, also behind the shield, tucked in his wings in amusement - obviously believing he wasn't a threat.

Harry snarled at them, hating the feeling of being so weak in comparison. He wanted something so badly it hurt and the violence took the bite out of the urge but didn't remove it. He still wanted but he didn't know what it was that he wanted and the iciness of his fury rose up and swallowed the burning of his anger as he rumbled darkly and paced.

The shield was large enough that he was stuck within the island and he didn't mind that - there were no males outside of the island that he wanted to fight. However, there was also a smaller shield keeping him confined to a clearing in the interior of the island. That was the

one he had just slammed into and it was the one he was contemplating now.

The Black shield stretched underground and up enough that he wouldn't be able to dig his way out nor jump out. At least, his lips curled back to reveal his fangs in a feral animal grin, not to their knowledge. He pulled on the electricity in the air and in his body and forced it to leap along the spine-like fur in a continuous cackle. It was similar to his first transformation after the potion and he could feel the deep inner waves of power rising up and stretching along his body. One such ripple of power worked its way through the shield and hit the two Warlord Princes standing outside. Saetan's brow furrowed at the sensation and he gripped the shield tighter. Lucivar eyed the younger with an expression of cocky amusement that made Harry growl and lose control over his waves for a second.

The feeling of change between a physical form and his lightning form dissipated and he roared his denial. The sound of thunder emerged instead of an actual roar and it made the ground beneath his paws shake. The jewel on his forehead, the one that had been lit up like a beacon as he'd called on the lightning to change, had gone out but now it flickered brightly and his ruby eyes flashed. As his roar echoed across the small island and his parted jaws closed he glowered at the other males.

A gentle mental prod brushed against his mind but to Harry's edgy state it may as well have been an all out assault. He roared and drew on as much electricity and lightning as he could manage until the change to lightning came in an explosion of power that sent him rocketing up into the sky, high above the Black shield.

He felt the power soaring through his now non-existent veins and danced through the clouds rapidly before arcing down through the sky, directly at Lucivar - the weaker of the two and the one he knew he should take out first. At this point, logical trains of thought were all but impossible; save for actions ruled by instinct, Harry was lost to the world.

TBC...

By the way, not that anyone besides me really cares, this fic has quite nearly hit the thirty thousand mark in terms of hits. Which is, happily enough, my most successful fic to date. The exact number, at the time of my writing this, is 29,467 which means that I only need 533 more hits to reach the vaulted total of 30,000. So...tell all your friends! Read the entire fic again from start to finish! Please help me reach my goal of 30,000!

Please excuse my blatant and shameless advertising. It's the sunburn, I tell you.

Chapter#26

Lucivar leapt out of the way with a harsh curse as the boy-turned-lightning struck the ground where he had previously been standing. His wings snapped out to shield his body from the worst of the debris of dirt and rock that flew up into the air. Despite being a bolt of lightning at the time, it was clear that something like eight hundred pounds couldn't hit the ground without leaving one hell of a crater. The dust settled and he folded his wings back to stare at the snarling and hissing thing before him.

The jewel on his forehead shone brightly even in the twilight darkness of Hell and bright blue lightning cackled along his fur charging the air around them and making it heavy and thick. Ruby eyes flashed as the beast's stance shifted into a predatory prowl. Lucivar raised one eyebrow in curiosity as he slowly began to circle with the younger male. The teen had the same feline grace that Daemon had only this Warlord Prince also had a feline body to go with it.

/ What does she call this again? ./ he asked his father briefly.

/ A Raijin. Some sort of demon a bit like a cat and a bit like a wolf. / Saetan dropped the Black shield he had been holding close to the younger and eyed the circling pair warily.

Lucivar smirked and the odd beast snarled, lips lifting in distaste at the smugness in the Eyrien's psychic scent. In that instant the changeling Warlord Prince darted forward, low to the ground and reached out with one massive paw to strike. Lucivar laughed and with one flap of his wings was out of harm's reach. He landed a moment later and called in one of his training sticks, sidestepped the second lash, and whopped the other male right on his head.

Harry snarled in his form and withdrew, ears pinned back in annoyance. Ruby eyes flashed and he darted out again. Lucivar dodged the first blow again and brought out his stick to whack him again but was startled when instead the beast-child slammed into him instead of lashing out with his claws. The force of the blow knocked him backwards and he smacked the Raijin's paws in reprimand for

the charge. It did nothing as the great lightning demon simply growled and slunk away from the stick, tail lashing angrily.

Lucivar took the momentary withdraw to catch his lost breath. Even a fully trained Eyrien warrior would need a moment to collect himself after being slammed into by eight-hundred pounds of force. The cackling beast glowered and stared and lashed his tail anxiously. Lucivar figured that the boy may have been more intelligent than he had originally given credit for. It seemed as if the younger Warlord had been testing him and had decided that the anger and need inside him wasn't strong enough to possibly risk his life.

Kirra's uncle made as if to back away but halted when he saw the smug look flash across the odd mixed lupine and feline features. He narrowed his eyes darkly upon the younger and watched as the long spiky tail swished lazily and slapped the ground, sending a small burst of sparks into the air. He gripped his stick and shifted his weight ever so slightly into a stance best suited to knock some sense into the rutting Warlord Prince.

Harry saw the implied threat and hissed, spiny fur puffing up in rage. In one smooth motion, he crouched down and launched himself at the Eyrien. Lucivar drew on his Ebon-Grey and focussed it into his staff. He crouched down and jammed the stick into the chest of the approaching Raijin. The Ebon-Grey power gathered at the end softened the blow but allowed the weaker male to toss the demon over his head and send him crashing into the undergrowth behind.

Saetan threw up a shield again, this time encompassing the sky above the younger as well. A thunderous roar sounded again, the sky echoing the call, as the half-lightning beast slammed into the Black barrier again. Lucivar watched as the beast began to pace, crimson eyes watching the two for weakness while flicking about to find a way out of his latest 'cage' to get to them. From the piercing look the softer ground was getting, the younger's idea would be more explosive than the last.

He sighed heavily and banished his training stick. Harry shifted into lightning again and began to ricochet around his container in a blur of blue-white light that shook the ground as a continuous boom of

thunder accompanied his movement. He could feel the headache coming on just like when Daemonar had been little. It was going to be a long rut.

Ron watched Harry as the boy drifted through the common room and out the portrait hole for something like the fifth time that day. He was worried - Harry was acting differently. Well, more differently than normal as he'd already been acting differently than his previous years at Hogwarts. He'd made it almost painfully clear that he didn't want anything to do with either him or Hermione and had been avoiding them for the past week. Still, his avoidance didn't deter from the fact that Ron had been living with him for going on five years now and that he knew many of Harry's habits.

Little things, like how Harry always got dressed inside the shower stall - not outside on one of the long wooden benches near the towel racks; or how he would try and go back to the dorms after breakfast to brush his teeth a second time; how he tossed and turned at night if the window wasn't opened - even during the winter months; how his glasses were always right beside his wand on his bedside table with the hangings of his bed parted there to allow him to grab them at a moment's notice. Harry may have changed over the summer but „even with the rather different changes to the green-eyed teen, he hadn't lost those achingly familiar habits of his.

Until now. Ron narrowed his eyes as he stared blankly at page thirty of Quidditch Through the Ages. Harry hadn't gone back up after breakfast to brush his teeth again. This in itself was not strange but Ron knew that if Harry didn't go up after breakfast he would positively go up after lunch. Lunch had come and gone and Harry hadn't once stepped into the bathroom.

"Ron?" He glanced over to meet the cinnamon eyes of a faintly frowning Ginny. His sister was wearing a set of comfortable cream pants and a rich red tunic with gold embroidery. He was rather annoyed to realize he didn't recognize her clothes as anything that would have been sold at any of the clothing stores she frequented and narrowed his eyes at her. A single eyebrow rose in question as she sat back and observed him, crossing one leg over the other imperiously. He saw the dragon-hide boots and his mood darkened. Where was she getting such...nice clothing?

"I don't remember mum buying those for you," he stated curtly. Her eyes flashed in quiet anger but her response was even and calm like his father's anger; almost scarier than his mother's explosive temper.

"Of course you wouldn't; mum didn't buy them for me," she replied easily. "Kirra's grandfather bought them for her but she'd gone through a growth spurt so they didn't fit her anymore."

"She's as tall as you are," Ron returned, eyes narrowing even more at the thought of his sister accepting a handout; as if she was dissatisfied with what she had. Certainly, he'd always dreamed of having more but that didn't mean he would accept handouts from others! He had more pride than that and he'd thought his sister did too.

"Kirra's a C-cup and I'm a B," she said bluntly. Ron felt his face heat and the tips of his ears burned in embarrassment. A few people nearby had heard his sister's comment and glanced over curiously, lips smirking in amusement and interest. He was mortified at how open and casual Ginny was about something so private and shifted uncomfortably while his sister simply regarded him in amusement. "Why on earth do you care anyways? No, don't answer that." She shook her head. "Something's bugging you; what is it?"

"Harry."

"Harry?"

"Harry," he confirmed.

"What about Harry?"

"He's...acting strange."

Her lips curled and she raised a single eyebrow in amused disbelief. He wondered why she was amused and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Her lips curled upwards even more and she laughed lightly. He scowled at her. How dare she laugh at something like that! It wasn't like she knew him so obviously she didn't understand!

"You wouldn't know cause you aren't his best friend!" he told her as much, sneering at her in disdain. Ron felt a chill creep down his back as her laughter abruptly cut off and she froze. Neville, by the fireplace, looked up from a Herbology essay and winced when he took in the female Weasley's expression. The cinnamon eyes pierced into Ron's blue ones and he felt like cowering under the predatory anger that flickered like fire as she stared at him with an outwardly apathetic appearance.

"So, I suppose you are?" Her voice was deceptively mild but Ron could feel the razor's edge ready to strike him just below the surface of serenity she was speaking from. "You, who dare criticise him for strengthening his family's ties and learning about his heritage? You, who he has publically disowned as a friend while simultaneously disbanding the 'Golden Trio' of Gryffindor? You, who still believes that anyone with a Dark Ability, such as Harry's Parseltongue, is a Death Eater, think, only now, that Harry's acting strangely? And it hasn't occurred to you that perhaps he's just growing up?"

Ron resisted the urge to wince only barely. Ginny stood, folding her arms in a motion so smooth and reminiscent of a Pureblooded lady that it made Ron feel as insignificant and childish as he always did whenever he was forced into the company of his distant and decidedly wealthier Pureblooded relatives. She stared down at him with a faint curl about her lips of disgust and then tilted her head to regard him from the corner of her eye as she settled her satchel neatly on one shoulder. He didn't dare reply to her diatribe and instead chose silence - much as he would whenever his father was angry (a rare but terrifying occurrence that was feared in their household more so than even Molly Weasley's explosions).

Her eyes flashed in satisfaction at his silence and she tossed her head, the neat ponytail she'd styled her hair in swaying with the movement. "Perhaps, Ronald, you should consider your own actions as of late, rather than harp on Harry's. As far as everyone else is concerned, it is you and Hermione who have changed, not Harry. He is as he has always been - a leader, friend, and a man of a lineage he takes great pride in. The only difference is that now he looks to better himself...and his friends insist on holding him back."

The silence that befell the common room was deafening and Ron took the time to actually look at the faces of his house-mates. The younger years looked at him with frowns of deepest annoyance, grouped together and glaring at the teen who had dared to monopolize their hero (they had grown up to stories of the amazing deeds of the Boy-Who-Lived and flatly refused to believe the Daily Prophet's nonsense); the middle years were indifferent to everything though several concealed looks of shame and disgust for ever having admired the so-called 'Golden Trio' if a person such as Ron had been a member (Colin Creevy looked up from something in his bag and shook his head sadly); the elder years studiously ignored the entire situation - they were too conflicted between the green-eyed 'saviour' they had hardly known because of his unknowing soloist habits and the deranged boy they read about in the papers. As Ron stared at the expressions, an icy hand seemed to grip his heart and a stony hand clenched around his throat.

Suddenly, Ron felt very alone.

Blaise tickled the pear on the painting and waited for the doorknob to appear. It did so quickly and he entered the 'elusive' Hogwarts kitchen. Most students didn't know where the kitchen was but any intelligent pureblood could figure it out if they ever bothered to ask a house-elf. Naturally, all of Slytherin knew how to about getting the location but none of them had actually bothered to summon a house-elf to actually find out where it was.

He entered the kitchens and smiled faintly at the rush of warm air from many the burning stoves and ovens within as well as the massive brick fireplace at the far end. Currently, house-elves were bustling around the kitchen - various squeaking voices calling out to one another as they busily piled covered dishes onto the four (five including the Head table) replicas of the tables in the Hall above. Unlike other mornings when the Zabini heir came down for an early breakfast, he was not assaulted by any of the elves that had been donated by his family over the many generations (they still felt a somewhat detached loyalty to the heir of their originating family but firmly reminded him that Hogwarts was now their household and they didn't technically have to listen to him - all said while they busied themselves fixing his favourite breakfast and through many inquiries

as to if it was precisely to his liking). He waited quietly in the doorway until he was acknowledged - not wanting to interrupt their work and force them to punish themselves for any accidents his sudden presence might cause.

"Mr Zabini," a dignified old elf bustled over, frowning at him from behind cracked and crooked old spectacles. The black pillowcase he wore looked to be as pressed and pristine as any uniform and the arm- and neck-holes seemed to be carefully cut and hemmed neatly as opposed to some messy and fraying holes on most elves' coverings. "What is the young sir wanting this morning?"

"I was hoping to get an early breakfast if it isn't too much trouble...?" Blaise smiled faintly at the indignant snort and huff he received as a reply at the insinuation that the Hogwarts elves would be unable to make a single breakfast while still preparing the regular menu.

"Zeke will be getting Mr Zabini's early breakfast himself," Zeke, the elderly elf, informed the Slytherin teen. He looked at the great-great-grandson of his last master sternly - but with a glimmer of fondness - and gestured off to the side where a small round table was set near a small wood-burning stove to keep out the chill. Blaise looked over and was surprised to note that a figure bundled in what appeared to be a fleece blanket, sat cross-legged in a cushy armchair. Before he could ask who it was, Zeke was gone off into the swarm of house-elves.

Blaise just shook his head, too amused and fond of the elf to complain, and walked over to take a seat in a second armchair at the table. He glanced at his breakfast-partner and started at the sight of pale-skin and dark-rimmed eyes on the face of one Harry James Potter. Green eyes glimmered warily but warmed faintly even as dark brows furrowed faintly over glinting emerald eyes. The red and gold of the male's Gryffindor tie was undone and hanging loosely in the rumpled collar of the white shirt beneath a black pullover. Slate grey pants were substituting for the usual black and looked to be made of something more comfortable than the uniform actually dictated (not that any purebloods actually followed the standard uniform designed by Madam Malkin - they always substituted her basic school fabrics for something more high-end and she was only too happy to agree).

Blaise could see the black school robes Harry was wearing were lined in silk and silently approved.

"Morning," the low rasp was followed by a harsh cough and the Slytherin boy jumped (though this show of surprise did not reach his face). Harry scowled irritably and curled his fingers tightly around the handle of his coffee mug. His knuckles were bone-white against the ivory of his skin and the Zabini heir idly wondered if Harry was strong enough to crack the ceramic cup - his dilapidated countenance certainly didn't support the idea.

"Morning," Blaise returned after taking a moment to collect himself. He took in the half-consumed breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausage, porridge, yogurt, various fruits, and a mostly empty pitcher of pumpkin juice with a critical eye. The plate Harry had been using was the size of one of the large serving platters and the Slytherin was doubtful that the slender Gryffindor was even able to eat as much as was absent from the platter. "Enough breakfast for you?"

Harry smiled vaguely in wry amusement even despite his exhaustion. "This is my third plate."

Blaise blinked in surprise but didn't comment. An anonymous elf scurried over and collected the serving platter from the round table and vanished into the throng of green and brown bodies. Harry watched the little one go and then returned eerily brilliant green eyes upon the black male as he settled into a chair opposite him. Zeke came over bearing a normal sized plate consisting of Blaise's usual selection; custard topped with fruit, toast, tea heavy on sugar and without milk or cream, and a stir-fry of vegetables and tofu. It seemed a little odd to many of his house-mates, who were content with whatever the house-elves made in bulk, but Blaise was used to eating at his mother's table which meant that most of their food were things that did not come from animals (Shaylee Zabini adored living creatures to the point that she had nearly sworn off even eggs and milk simply because they came from animals - Blaise had talked her out of it and she had agreed only under the conditions that they purchase land for their own farm so that she could ensure that the creatures received only the best care possible).

"Thank you, Zeke," Blaise murmured. The stately old elf bowed and returned to work. The Zabini heir looked up and saw Harry watch the elf leave before returning his attention to the fresh fruit salad before him and the female elf standing nearby scowling at him in disapproval.

"Mister Lord Potter will be eating hims fruits!" she scolded in a soft and slightly hesitant tone that was nonetheless firm.

"I've already consumed three platters," he replied calmly, eyes flickering as his tense grip on his mug relaxed and his eyes softened.

"All with no fruits!"

"Yes, but think of all the other good things I ate."

"Yous did not eats yous fruits," she replied stubbornly. "Yous will eats yous fruits or that is all Mister Lord Potter will be gettings for all meals."

The emerald-eyed teen smiled and tipped his head submissively, taking up his spoon and eating some of the aforementioned fruit while looking pointedly at the elf. She watched until he had swallowed and then narrowed her eyes until he opened his mouth to prove he'd actually swallowed it and not just pushed it under his tongue or into his cheek. Satisfied, she patted his knee affectionately before returning to help the other elves with setting up the breakfast platters on the replicate tables.

The moment she was gone Harry put the spoon down and stood. Despite the exhaustion in his stance and the slightly rumpled appearance of his clothes, Harry still looked every inch the young Lord he was. Blaise watched as he motioned for another elf to take away the fruit and murmured instructions not to tell that he hadn't eaten it all. The new elf pinned its ears but nodded and shuffled off. He straightened and glanced over at Blaise, tilting his head politely. "See you later?"

"Certainly," Blaise returned easily. "Good day."

"You as well." Harry exited the kitchens leaving a silently curious Zabini behind.

Fred and George Weasley were, for once, not doing anything to cause trouble or with the intentions to cause trouble in the future. They were simply sitting out by the lake enjoying the warmer weather. Unfortunately, the warmer weather had also brought about rain and so the storm of the night previous had left the ground wet but a few drying charms and a conjured blanket later and they were fine to relax. They'd chosen a spot on the eastern side of the castle, south of the Quidditch pitch. There were a number of willows planted here - long branches drooping low and trailing in the murky waters of the loch. It was under one of these trees that the twins had set up to spend their morning (their Herbology class was due to study the blooming aquatic plants and were supposed to meet by the lake anyways so their chosen location was one of convenience as much as it was one of comfort).

"I'm sick of this pretending," Fred declared abruptly.

George looked over at his brother cautiously. The tone the elder of the twins was using was one he had only rarely heard before and from what little he remembered it hadn't been a pleasant experience. He observed the tense lines of his twin's identical face and wondered if he looked as furious and irritated as Fred did. Unlike Ron and their other brothers, the twins did not have blue eyes. They, like Ginny, had brown eyes - though her's were more cinnamon coloured while their's were more of an amber-brown in colour, almost golden in the proper sunlight. Currently, with the early morning sun streaming through the willow branches, Fred's eyes were spitting golden flame as he stared moodily across the lake.

"Pretending what, exactly?" George asked in a would-be light voice even though he already knew the source of his twin's ire.

"That we're okay with everything that stupid hag is doing, that we care about our grades, that we're ever going to have a job mum approves of," he exhaled heavily and flopped backwards so his head lay in George's lap, "everything."

"Hm," George would normally have smiled at his twin's words and have brushed them off, bringing their conversation onto the road of inventing new pranks or new products for their fledgling business but he could hear the real exhaustion in Fred's words and so said nothing. His hands went to play idly with his brother's hair and Fred's eyes closed lazily as he waited for his younger brother to respond. "I understand what you mean," he began calmly, "but we really can't do anything about her aside from upping our quota of pranks and targeting her specifically. Besides, we've never said anything about being okay with what she's doing; everyone knows it's us pulling the pranks it's just no one's saying anything for fear of getting us in trouble with the mad old toad."

"Fair enough," Fred mumbled.

George smiled secretly and tapped his twin's temple with one finger. "We both know we don't care about our grades, just that we learn what we need, so that can't be what's really bothering you." He felt Fred shift and continued to speak. "I know it's disappointing that mum won't approve of what we want to do with our lives but we have people on our side as well; Harry, Ginny, Lee..."

Alright," Fred opened his eyes and stared up into a face identical to his own, "alright. I get it. No more moping."

"It's okay to be upset, Fred," George murmured softly. "Even we have a right to get upset sometimes."

Fred remained silent and George didn't continue. As far as the world was concerned, the twins were the wicked pranksters who were only rarely serious and never angry with anyone (Percy aside, but they simply just pretended he didn't exist anymore). They'd been that way ever since they could remember and now only George believed that they had the ability to actually be serious anymore; actually be themselves.

The truth was, although they were excellent pranksters and everyone seemed to love them (even the Slytherins, though they'd never admit it), the twins were incredibly solitary. Ever since they were little, they had strived to be identical in every way. If one of them got hurt, the

other would promptly injure themselves in the precisely same way. Each and every scar was measured and matched on the other. If one was more tanned than the other, then one would remain in the shade until the other matched him once more. They learned to walk, talk, eat, and even breathe the same. They'd alternately call each other by their wrong names or else combine their names so that 'Fred and George' became 'Gred and Forge'.

In an effort to differentiate the two, their mother had gotten them a bunk bed instead of two twin-beds. It had been a rather smart move, as George hated sleeping on the top bunk since he always fell off and that meant that for several hours every night they could be told apart from the other. Naturally, this separation was unacceptable to the twins and George had promptly moved to sharing the lower bunk with Fred, who was only too happy to oblige to his younger twin's whims. As they eventually grew out of the bunk and instead got the two twin-beds back, they had gotten so used to sleeping together that they couldn't bare the scant few feet separation at night. They had pushed their beds together and stolen their father's wand and worked all day to make the two beds merge into one giant bed. It had worked and the twins had been content once more.

After they came to Hogwarts, things had changed. They didn't have a single large bed to share and the other boys in their dorm looked at them funny the second day there after they had spent their night curled up together in George's bed. They had resolved then that, if they couldn't together all the time, that they would make it so that it didn't matter; they would be the same person while still being two actual people. When George had befriended Lee Jordan, so did Fred. The black boy could tell the two apart but didn't know which was which. He was the perfect friend for the twins; recognizing they were separate people but not being able to tell who was who.

It wasn't until their third year that they realized the magnitude of what they had done. No longer were they Fred and George Weasley, nor even Gred and Forge Weasley. No, they were 'The Weasley Twins'. They were no longer two separate but the same people; they were one single living thing that just happened to have two parts. George would be approached by girls asking for Fred and Fred by girls wanting George. When corrected, they were generally smiled at and

said that 'either would do' or something of the like. If one twin was given detention so was the other as their professors couldn't be sure which was the one to actually commit the error.

Then, things had changed. George had spotted a scruffy little boy struggling with a massive trunk and a cage with a large snowy owl. The owl had been watching her master with luminescent golden eyes which were sad and almost apologetic for making more work for the tiny little one in the tent-like clothes. George, not following the wavelength of his brother's interest in whatever it was that had caught his attention, had watched the little boy struggle helplessly for a moment longer, straining too-thin arms to haul the trunk, before giving up and leaning against his trunk. He'd grown mildly interested when, against any logic that George had, no adult had stepped forward to help the child. Instead, the boy picked up the beautiful owl and taken her aboard the train and into a compartment at the very back and out of the way of everyone else on the platform. When the boy returned from depositing his owl safely aboard, he'd stared at his trunk with a furrowed brow as his glasses slipped down his nose.

George had leaned back, away from where his brother had stooped to look between the gaps in the crate at the giant tarantula that Lee Jordan had brought with him. The little boy had looked up, scanning the platform helplessly, and for a split second his eyes had locked with George's.

To this day, George swore he'd felt his heart stop and clench painfully at the horrible loneliness reflecting back from behind a fathomless sadness. It was as if this malnourished, emerald-eyed, bespectacled boy was the very embodiment of sorrow. He'd taken a step forward, unknowingly drawing Fred's attention away in curiosity to what his twin was seeing. George had watched the boy struggle to haul the massive (to him) trunk up the stairs, had seen the wince of pain as the trunk landed on his toes - unprotected by the trainers worn to the point that even their family would have thrown them away - and no doubt made worse when he repeated this fumble two more times.

George hadn't been able to watch the little one struggle a moment longer and had hurried over, a wide grin plastered to his face to conceal the worry he felt deep inside at the realization that this

adorable little boy didn't have anyone to see him off or to help him with something as simple as getting his things aboard a train. "Need a hand?"

"Yes, please," the boy had panted. He'd glanced up with such an expression of pure happiness that someone had actually bothered to help that George broke the silent promise between him and his twin and called out.

"Oy, Fred! C'mere and help!" he hollered down the platform. Fred was there in an instant, eyes silently questioning why they were paying any attention to the anonymous first-year. George had glared at his twin for the first time in years, berating the other for even suggesting that they retract his offer of help when the little one was so obviously alone. Fred's eyes had widened and he'd hurried to help his twin, shooting the bewildered green-eyed boy a curious look as the two of them (plus the little one) managed to lift the trunk into the train and get it tucked away into the corner of the designated compartment.

"Thanks," the boy said in a breathy and soft sort of voice as he pushed away the sweaty black hair clinging to his face. It was then that George had caught sight of the scar. The only scar of that shape and that position. The Scar. Harry Potter. The little one was Harry Potter. George had simply stared, shocked at the sight.

"What's that?" Fred leaned forward slightly, also startled at the sight. He pointed to the scar and had shot George an accusing stare.

George, to both reassure his brother he hadn't known who the boy was and to keep up appearances, had piped up with "Blimey. Are you -?"

"He is," Fred continued, accepting his brother's silent statement and keeping up the outward conversation. "Aren't you?"

"What?" The poor boy had looked so confused, looking between them in search of the elusive knowledge that apparently concerned him. He had been shaking, eyes bright and wide as he looked on with those expressive emerald eyes. George had felt rather than seen his

twin soften and then tense as he took in the dilapidated form of the 'Hero' of the wizarding world.

"Harry Potter," they'd chorused.

"Oh, him," he'd said, as if relieved it hadn't been something else but unnerved by this knowledge all the same. "I mean, yes, I am."

Harry hadn't known it but, in the moment they had identified him, the moment that he had confirmed their statement, and the moment he had peered curiously and innocently up at them - seeing them for Fred and George rather than for the Weasley Twins, even if he hadn't known their names yet - he had earned himself the protection and care of the twins. It was unlikely that he would ever lose their protection or the affection that had followed.

"Fred, George," a voice very familiar and yet entirely different came from a part in the green curtain of the weeping willow around them. George looked over, eyes softening as they settled upon an equally exhausted Harry Potter. Fred sat up, grinning and patting the blanket invitingly. Emerald eyes danced in amusement as the younger teen came over and flopped lazily on the ground covering while peering up at the twins with the same innocent and curious gaze he always looked at them with. George couldn't remember a time where Harry hadn't made the effort to look at them like that - even when he'd first come back from whatever training it was that he had been doing and he'd been distant and his eyes haunted. Even then, when he'd looked at the twins (George liked to think that he and his twin had saved the young hero from the creeping loneliness formerly entrenched within his eyes) his eyes had been the same innocent and curious gaze he'd always settled on them. "It's a nice morning, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Fred answered this time, ruffling Harry's hair with an affection reserved only for Harry (even Ron and Ginny failed to earn this particular brand of love - it was the one that the twins reserved only for each other and the one person in the world who could tell them apart without fail, even if he wasn't always aware that he could). "What about you though? You don't look too good, mate."

"Just tired," Harry smiled at them, eyes flashing with memories and more exhaustion before returning to their usual glimmer.

"You could catch a few winks before class if you want," George offered, eyeing their younger friend worriedly, taking in the dark-rimmed eyes and the pallid complexion.

"We'll make sure no one come over and bugs you," Fred assured him. His eyes were golden in the sun and flashed dangerously at the thought of anyone daring to disturb their self-adopted third-twin (which, logically, didn't make sense but was the only way to describe their relationship) while he was on watch. "You look like death warmed over."

"Such kind words, Fred," Harry smirked but he had already leaned back and was half-way to closing his eyes completely. They both smiled at the perfect ability of Harry's to tell them apart immediately.

"Go to sleep Harry. Wouldn't do well for our benefactor to up and collapse on us, would it, Forge?"

"Indeed it would not, dear Gred," Fred nodded in agreement, watching out of the corner of his eye as Harry chuckled and closed his eyes fully. "Someone might accuse us of sabotaging him for his money."

George laughed silently and nodded firmly, eyes dancing. "That simply would not do; bad for business." Harry's laugh was now nothing more than a vague hum of acknowledgement and the twins smiled sadly at one another over his sleeping form.

They may not be able to do much for their little one, now that he was growing into the man and Lord he was, but they would still help him in whatever way he needed. Even if all he needed was a few extra hours of undisturbed sleep.

TBC...

Chapter#27

It had rained again the night before. Harry hadn't slept well with his inner Raijin dancing and straining at the vague possibility of a storm - one that the Raijin could most assuredly turn into a lightning storm - and it had made his sleep restless and seemingly endless. The green-eyed male had tossed all night, eventually putting up a silencing charm when Neville had dragged himself from sleep for the third time to ask if Harry was alright. He'd been swimming through dreams of striding down the long corridor to the Department of Mysteries and standing before the plain black door with nothing but the nagging sensation of needing to get inside but being unable to do anything but stare longingly at it.

The dream was something that had only started after the attack on Mr Weasley. At first, it hadn't happened often - only three or four times in just over seven weeks - but each time he had the dream it would replay itself increasingly more. He had worked through the Occlumency books he'd found in Paladine's former place of residence - the forgotten study of Salazar Slytherin, which contained books related to the Founder's less serious pursuits but that were nonetheless highly advanced things - in an attempt to control the dream but it had failed. He was seriously considering actually going for the lessons with Severus Snape even though they had both agreed that his shields should have been sufficient to block any of Voldemort's visions - with the exception of the ones Voldemort forced through. As he had previously taken the time designated for the lessons and put them towards other pursuits such as training with Susan and Diodium, or learning yet more weaponry and Craft from Kirra, Harry was both unwilling and annoyed at the prospect of giving up the unquestioned time available to him.

The mood in the castle was subdued and fearful and Harry strolled through the hallways with the air of one who had just come from a funeral and had found that more pleasant than where he was now. His school uniform was neat but still slightly rumpled and he ignored the curious fearful looks sent at him by much of the students. It wasn't that it was unusual to see a Gryffindor on the fifth floor - it was common knowledge that their dorm was somewhere on the seventh and the quickest route was by a stairwell near the statue of Boris the

Bewildered - but it was unusual for a Gryffindor to be striding so knowingly in the direction of the long winding narrow staircase that led up to the entrance of Ravenclaw Tower. Of course, this was Harry Potter, and so many students simply ignored this behaviour as something only the Boy-Who-Lived could manage and hurried away before they were faced with the uncomfortable knowledge of what precisely the young lord was up to.

Harry, having studied his father's map often enough, knew the location of every dorm in Hogwarts and even some of the old locations of the dorms that had been abandoned for one reason or the other. So, as such, he climbed the staircase of the tower and paused once he came to a door with nothing but an eagle-shaped knocker made of bronze adorning the wood. It seemed odd for a door to have a knocker and yet no handle nor hidden keyhole and yet it did not seem out of place in the emptiness of the stairwell. Harry stared at the knocker expectantly until it shifted and the eagle's beak opened.

"What do you want?" it asked in a polite but still annoyed voice.

"Is Luna Lovegood in?" Harry inquired, ignoring the knocker's question entirely and still staring expectantly.

"Not an answer."

"That is because I'm not trying to get into the rooms you guard; I'm merely trying to find Miss Lovegood."

"Well I can't very well just tell you," the eagle snapped. A single eyebrow rose imperiously and Harry hummed as if he hadn't heard a word the eagle had just said. "Oh fine, just wait a moment..." The eagle's eyelids closed and it remained perfectly still for a moment before the door swung open and Harry was left staring at the long unbound blonde hair and dreamy sapphire eyes of Luna 'Looney' Lovegood.

"A little bird said you wanted to see me?" she asked absently. A smirk played at the corner of Harry's lips; the statement would sound odd even to the Ravenclaws and yet he had no doubt that Luna knew

perfectly well how to communicate with the door guardian even when she was nowhere near it.

"I have a favour to ask," Harry began airily, "you've mentioned your father is the editor of the Quibbler?"

"He is," Luna dipped her head serenely and yet her eyes still sharpened with curiosity. "Why do you ask?"

"Would you be willing to help me get an article printed? It would only be a small one - a page or two at most."

"It would depend," she began thoughtfully, "father would not take it unless it was written by an already published author or, if not, if it was one about something like the Crumple-Horned Snorkack."

Harry pondered this carefully. He had wanted to print something about Voldemort's return; something to counter the Ministry propaganda printed in the Daily Prophet. He would have written the article himself but this now proved a problem. Luna was the only person he knew who could get his word printed and yet she wouldn't be able to unless someone else wrote the article for him - someone who was already published. That ruled out getting anyone at Hogwarts to write it for him and he already knew that no one at any other papers or magazines would print anything he had to say. Unless...a wide smirk split his lips. It could work...he'd just have to word his letter correctly and he wouldn't have any problems getting an accomplished journalist to interview him.

"If I bring you a copy of the article in a week or two, will that give you enough time to convince your father?"

Luna hummed vaguely as her eyes drifted to stare into space into space blankly. Still, Harry watched her nod once in a curt manner that was odd when paired with her empty and smiling expression and he bowed thankfully before returning back the way he'd come.

He needed to find Paladine - see if she would be willing to take a message for him - he'd need all the intimidation he could get if that one tried to weasel her way out of doing what he wanted.

Paladine surveyed the richly decorated apartment with interest. She had so rarely left her Master Slytherin's quarters at the school that she could no longer remember any place of residence aside from a castle setting. The apartment before her was decorated with high-end furniture in a rich brown leather to compliment the hardwood floor and the forest-green walls. She took in the soft cream curtains that fluttered around the open window she had just come through as well as on either side of the doors to the Juliet balcony. She could see over the half-wall into the kitchen where there was an odd mix of magical and muggle appliances that somehow didn't look out of place. A large fireplace with a mantle displaying a few pictures took up one wall near a seating area while the wall opposite it held a bookcase and a door that presumably led into the bedroom.

All-in-all, Paladine decided, it was a tastefully decorated place to live. If only the person who lived here could be as tasteful as she decorated her home... The brilliant yellow eyes turned to the woman slouched at the desk, glaring moodily at the acid-green quill that sat poised as if to write on its own over a roll of fresh parchment. The woman had blonde hair that was pulled back in a messy knot that in no way was done purposely but looked like it had once been curled. Her nails were long and the red nail-polish was chipped and flaking. A pair of jewelled glasses sat discarded on the desk near a glass of blood-red wine. Her eyes were glazed and, when she sipped from the wine, her hand trembled ever so faintly and the wine sloshed against the sides - coming close to, but not actually, spilling.

The reptilian being wished she could take a more human form as she had once been able to but sighed internally in resignation when her Coatl form failed to even flicker a little into something else. At least she had her bonded's letter to explain things and it was a good thing the woman before her had an open bottle of ink; she could write with the tip of her tail if worst came to worst. But first, to get the woman's attention without giving her a heart attack...

Large green-feathered wings flared and Paladine hissed, flapping her wings and generally making a display of herself so that the woman looked up, startled. The green eyes that turned to her were a shade too close to blue to even barely resemble her bonded and it pleased Paladine that there were no similarities between the sad excuse for a

female before her and her beloved human. She held out her tail, curled around a roll of parchment, and shook it a little until the human female caught sight of the crest pressed into the wax seal. The blue-green eyes widened in surprise and she quickly accepted the letter, unrolling it eagerly and reading rapidly. Her eyes narrowed in concentration and the glazed eyes sharpened as the bright orbs flicked back and forth rapidly. The woman, at one point, picked up the previously discarded glasses and continued to read at an even quicker pace than before.

Paladine curled lazily as the woman read. Her master had been every bit as nasty and manipulative as he could be but everything he had written in that letter was veiled behind social niceties and never outrightly said. It was amusing to read, that was certain, and yet, as Paladine was forced to sit in the draft from the open window, she wished her Master had just come out and said what he meant.

"I don't believe it...the boy's actually grown a brain," the woman muttered with something like fond amusement in the annoyed tone she used. "I knew that brat would have made a good Slytherin."

Paladine hissed softly, making the woman start again and look up as if she had forgotten who the messenger was (which she had). The serpent didn't like her bonded being compared to her old Master; the man was a fair human but he kept such horrid familiars it made Paladine sick.

"I suppose you'll want a reply then?" the woman managed. "Let me just find some parchment..."

Paladine wished she could roll her eyes. Instead, she simply shifted and let herself drop right into the middle of the desk, on top of the parchment, and generally in the way. The human started again and narrowed her eyes upon the large winged serpent. Paladine flicked her tail experimentally and then dipped it into the open inkwell, scrawling quickly in human-tongue upon a visible section of the thick paper. Tell me, she wrote in short. The woman's eyebrows shot up to her hairline in surprise and Paladine hissed at her in distaste.

"Alright," the blonde hastened to placate the annoyed Coatl. "Tell your master that Rita Skeeter says she'll be there." She gave Paladine an odd sideways look. "So he does speak Parseltongue?"

Paladine bobbed her head, hissed once more, and then flapped to gain height before sweeping out the window. The journalist she left behind sat staring at the opened letter for a long moment before scrambling to her feet and dashing into her bedroom. She needed to prepare for this meeting with the young Lord Potter!

The morning of the fourteenth Harry woke early, as usual. Kirra was going to the Quidditch game later on in the day, regardless of Harry not being on the team anymore, and so she wanted to get as much sleep as possible; letting him off the hook for morning sparring. He welcomed being able to have a few extra hours sleep and took a leisurely time in the shower. It was a windy sort of day, he could tell by the swaying trees of the Forbidden Forest, and so he pulled on a warm forest-green jumper over a black t-shirt. This was matched with a pair of casual black slacks and dragon-hide boots. He sorted through his trunk until he found the long black trench-coat he liked and slung it over one arm after making sure to stuff his leather gloves in the pockets for his visit with Cho to Hogsmeade.

"Going with someone to Hogsmeade today, Harry?" Neville teased lightly as Harry took a seat across from him in the Great Hall that morning. Ginny glanced sideways curiously, arching an eyebrow in silent question.

"I'm meeting Cho today," Harry replied easily, ignoring the wide grin that spread across the Longbottom Heir's face. "I've told her I'd tell her how Cedric died." The grin faded and Neville looked at Harry sympathetically. Ginny's brows came down low over her eyes and Harry hurried to reassure her. "She deserves to know and I don't mind telling. It just when people get all nosy about it..."

"Well, good then." Ginny nodded in satisfaction and Harry smiled at the protective streak the pretty red-head possessed. "So, will I get to see you at all today or am I left with the most stubborn couple of the century over here?" She thumbed in the direction of Neville while nodding towards the Slytherin table. Harry laughed and Neville pouted at the tease even as Ginny beamed widely.

"I'll try and find you after lunch to rescue you," he told her very seriously. "But, seriously, Neville, you need to stop pulling a Ron and just go out with him already. Ginny's already told me you two have dated before."

"I'd hardly call a few snogs in a broom cupboard a date," Neville grumbled but his face was flushed pink and his eyes glimmering with pleasure at the thought.

"Please, Zabini is one of the untouchables; a snog with him may as well be a bloody proposal," Ginny scoffed. Neville's blush deepened and they stopped teasing and instead took up an easy conversation of how they thought the Quidditch game would turn out. Ginny, being Harry's replacement as Gryffindor seeker, declared that Gryffindor would win even if they had Ron as a keeper. Harry wished he'd still had his Firebolt so that Ginny would have a better chance but she insisted she'd be able to milk the school brooms for more than they were willing to give. It was an advantage, she said, of having so many older, Quidditch-loving, brothers. She'd been riding since she was little, before her magical core had settled some, and had become highly adept at using accidental magic - which became more of a wandless magic as she got older - to power her family's old brooms to suit her own wants.

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Hedwig. The snowy owl drifted down, curiously without a letter, and landed directly in front of Harry. The dark-haired boy looked curiously at his avian familiar and she hooted briefly. His eyes glinted triumphantly and he nodded ever so slightly as he laughed and said something about Hedwig 'looking for his bacon' as he promptly held out a strip. She accepted it, bobbed her head in reply to something he muttered under his breath, and took flight again.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked warily. She had seen the exchange that no one else at the table, aside from Neville, could.

"Oh nothing, just another appointment I have today," Harry replied airily. "I'll see you later then? Bye." He waved cheerfully as he

gathered his jacket up and left the hall. Ginny watched him go with narrowed eyes but eventually shrugged and returned to her breakfast.

In the Great Hall, Harry slipped into an alcove near a hidden window and quietly opened it to admit Paladine. The serpentine familiar ruffled her wings in annoyance at the cold and promptly coiled around his arm and shoulder for warmth when he offered said limb. Her silvery scales seemed duller than normal and Harry plucked a hanging bit of skin off and gently soothed the newly revealed scales with a touch of power from his Sapphire. Paladine made an odd purring sound and he smiled.

\$ Feeling better? \$ Harry hissed softly. His familiar coiled even more tightly around him and scowled absently as only a serpent can scowl. Harry chuckled at the sight and stroked her head until she relaxed and made the purring sound again.

\$ I dislike this woman, \$ Paladine said, \$ but she if she is what you need, my Master, then I will not say anything more. She will meet with you at the nicer pub in that village by the train station - the Three Broomsticks, I think you said it was called. She says that she expects you to pick up the tab as it is your friend's fault that she is out of a paying job. \$

Harry chuckled at the message and silently applauded Hermione for her stroke of brilliance in blackmailing the woman. \$ I will see you later, then, \$ he said. The Coatl dipped her head and hissed her assent before taking flight again. He watched the brilliant green and silver serpent leave and then shut the window against the breeze (the castle was drafty enough as it was).

He waited a while before leaving the safety of the alcove, taking the time to do something like a diagnostic of his mental shields. He had promised Cho he would speak of Cedric's death but was unwilling to do so on the off chance that he would feel the old guilt for the elder boy's untimely end. After assuring himself that the shields were sufficient enough that he could keep his emotions under wraps, Harry returned to the main entrance hall and headed towards the front doors where Cho was already waiting for him.

"Su," Harry said, glancing curiously at the young girl who stood stoically beside her older sister, "good morning...and congratulations on your engagement."

Su's stoic mask cracked and her brow furrowed in innocent confusion. "How do you know about that?" She spared a glance at her sister who looked equally surprised.

Harry smiled secretly. He wasn't about to tell her that their mother had spilled the beans on their decision to allow the engagement in her last letter to him and that he had known weeks before she had. It wasn't good for a Gryffindor's health to anger a cunning Slytherin female like the little one before him. "The Weasley twins know about every party that happens in this school; they do provide most of the food, after all."

The mask was back and Su nodding in satisfied understanding. "Thank you. We shall have to remember to invite the three of you to the wedding as it is obvious that you did not spill such knowledge to the rest of your uncultured house."

Harry laughed, understanding perfectly what Su meant. It was a sad realization, when he really thought about it, but Gryffindor seemed to be a highly right-wing house (in the sense that anything that did not fit their ideal version of the world was to be rejected and destroyed by any means necessary). Aside from Neville and Ginny, who hid it so carefully that no one would ever suspect it of them, Harry could not think of anyone else who would be accepting of an arranged marriage at such a young age. Harry didn't care himself - he had lived with the Dursleys for so long that he supported any type of relationship as long as there was love - but he was sure that, if he had asked anyone else, they would emphatically declare that any form of marriage or steps toward marriage at Su's age to be unethical and deserving of legal persecution to 'save' the younger girl from her no doubt paedophilic fiancé. Gryffindor house had changed over so many years to the point that almost all pureblood traditions had been dismissed from the social structure; the exact opposite of Slytherin house and the reason why the two were such awful rivals.

"Fred and George are well-hidden radicals in the lion's den," Harry said, lips curling in amusement. "They take care to prank everyone equally, if you hadn't noticed yet. Umbridge is an exception to their rule, naturally."

"Naturally," Su agreed. The Slytherins were careful not to anger the High Inquisitor because, like it or not, she did hold power over them. That did not mean that they agreed with her though. Su and Felix both despised the woman and they looked down upon Draco Malfoy and his gang for even considering that cultivating favour with her was a good idea; she would not last for any length of time for her position to become useful to them.

"Shall we go?" Cho asked when it became apparent that her younger sister was quite finished with her conversation. Harry dipped his head positively and Cho smiled faintly. "I'll see you later, Su."

"Good day," Su said, smiling ever so faintly at the older Chang. "Have a good time, sister."

Cho smiled with a just a touch of sadness and a brief apprehensive look towards Harry who had slipped his jacket on and was standing with his arms folded behind his back and waiting patiently for her to finish her goodbye. "I think I will."

As they walked along, Harry looked over at the Quidditch pitch. Ron was Keeper, he knew that from knowledge not because he could actually tell which of the Keepers Ron was, but he could easily pick out Ginny. Her magic 'felt' different after he had done the Blood ritual. The merging with his magical core had allowed him the ability to feel the magic around him and Ginny's stuck out in the same manner that McGonagall's did; a sign of that person being an animagus or at least being able to change their form wandlessly.

His eyes glimmered longingly at the thought of being in the air again. He'd always loved flying simply because it was so magical that nothing he did on a broom could possibly remind him of his horrid childhood at the hands of the Dursleys. He missed flying intensely; he didn't need Quidditch to love flying and he never would but the horrible Umbridge woman had confiscated his broom and mounted it

on the wall of her office, wrapped in chains, alongside Fred and George's.

"You really miss it, don't you?" Cho said softly. He glanced over and saw her watching him intently, eyes shimmering with understanding.

"Yeah," he sighed, "I suppose I do."

"Remember the first time we played against each other, in your third year?" she asked, smiling fondly at the memory.

"Yeah." He snorted faintly in mock annoyance. "You kept blocking me."

"And Wood told you not to be a gentlemen and knock me off my broom if you had to," she continued with a wide affectionate grin. "I heard he got taken on by Pride of Portree, is that right?"

Harry shook his head negatively. "No, it was Puddlemere United; I saw him at the World Cup last year."

"Oh, I saw you there, too, remember? We were on the same campsite. It was really good, wasn't it?"

Harry smiled, thankful that she didn't want to talk about Cedric just yet and pleased with the gentleness of a female presence beside him. It gave him something to focus on, rather than lamenting the loss of his flying privileges and slight anxiety over the meeting he had scheduled to lunch at the Three Broomsticks.

They had continued the conversation with the subject of the Quidditch World Cup all the way down the drive and through the gates but with the thought of the meeting Harry quieted as Cho continued to speak. He was unsure of how long his friendly outing with her would last, especially since they would be speaking of Cedric, and his meeting was fairly important. He only hoped Cho would forgive him for interrupting when the time came.

"Potter and Chang!" The screech effectively broke off their conversation. Cho's features twisted into one of distaste and

annoyance while Harry's turned to ice as he tilted his head to the side to observe Pansy Parkinson and her band of female Slytherin cronies. "Urgh, Chang, I don't think much of your taste...at least Diggory was good-looking!"

Cho looked angry enough to curse the girls as they took the time to stop and shriek in a pointed fashion while glancing nastily over at the pair. Harry laid a hand on her shoulder when she made to move forwards and gently guided her to the side and stood to face Pansy head on. His eyes were dark with fury for the pathetic female in front of him insulting the one he had accompanied and one-by-one Pansy's companions went silent and stared at him apprehensively. Still, she did not seem outwardly perturbed and continued to sneer at him as though her words had actually harmed him.

"Parkinson," he began calmly but his voice was like ice stabbing through her and sending chills up all their spines, "I would not normally give thought to anything you say but you have gone far enough today to warrant this warning; do not speak of myself or Cedric Diggory, god rest his soul, like that again. Whether or not you wish to acknowledge it, I am the Heir of the Potter family." He casually lifted the concealing charms on his Head ring and flicked his fingers so that it caught the light and caused her eyes to widen and her pallor to fade rapidly as she realized just what she had done. "It would not be wise to anger me or mine, especially since I have it on excellent authority that the Parkinsons don't even make the fifty first accounts in Gringotts nor any other wizarding bank in the world. Of course, if you deny that, it begs the question of how low your family will stoop if they are to put their fortune in a muggle bank," he sneered the word. Even if it pained him to insult the world he was raised in, it was the most effective insult against this particular Slytherin - one of Malfoy's crowd.

Pansy flushed angrily but another flash of his ring and she scurried away with her friends in tow, pale as a ghost. Harry waited until she was out of sight before the ice in his eyes melted and he smiled in amusement at a gaping Cho. "Shall we?" He offered his arm, staring at her with warmly dancing eyes.

"That was brilliant!"

He smiled at her and held her arm warmly in his grasp. "That was your father's advice in play along with Lady Zabini's weekly gossip updates."

"Zabini!" Cho gaped at him. "You know Lady Zabini?"

"Through Ginny Weasley, through her son, Blaise," he agreed. "Highly intelligent woman; almost made it into Ravenclaw but her mind was a little too cunning for the poor ravens to deal with at the time and so the Hat put her in Slytherin instead."

Cho looked suitably impressed and their conversation took off onto more political topics and the hints of negotiating an official, documented, alliance between their two families. Harry had been playing this word game through letter for long enough with her parents and, since she was technically able to negotiate on their behalf, the conversation wasn't a waste of time. A new alliance hadn't been formed in years, ever since the dawn of the First Wizarding War, and Harry and Cho were determined that, if they were to join their families, it would be done in the tradition of both their households and that responsibilities to the alliance were shared equally and efficiently.

Unfortunately, their conversation was interrupted by the clouds choosing to release the accumulated moisture they had collected. Harry's Raijin stirred as the first icy drops struck his face and his neck. He looked upwards, longing to change and dance through the clouds but knowing that he couldn't. Cho mistook the longing for wishing to be out of the rain and glanced down a road branching off the High Street anxiously.

"Want to go get a coffee?"

"Yeah," Harry pulled his attention back to the female and raised an eyebrow in question as he glanced around, "where?"

"Haven't you ever been to Madam Puddifoot's?" she asked rhetorically as she led him quickly towards a small shop near Scrivenshaft's. "It's rather cute, er..." they had just entered the shop and Harry resisted the urge to wince, "...most of the time," she

finished with an odd look on her face. "I'd forgotten it was Valentine's."

The whole of the place was cramped and steamy and pink. There were frills everywhere and little bows and hovering golden cherubs that occasionally threw pink confetti over whichever unfortunate couple happened to be sitting at the table they hovered over. Harry followed Cho to the only available table - one near the steamy window about a foot and a half away from Roger Davies and a pretty blonde girl.

Madam Puddifoot hurried over, managing with great difficulty to get to their table-side, and took their order for coffee. Harry watched her go before turning his attention back to Cho. She was looking at Davies with an odd expression and he glanced over before snorting. The two were now kissing over their sugar bowl and the elder boy's school tie was dipping into his mostly-empty teacup. Cho followed his gaze and snorted a little too before turning her eyes to meet his and rolling them in amusement. He smirked faintly and accepted the coffees that Madame had brought over. The older woman smiled and winked at them before returning to her other customers.

"He asked me out, you know," Cho commented quietly as Harry sipped at his coffee. His head tilted silently, one eyebrow raised sardonically for her to continue. "I turned him down, obviously," she tilted her own head in his direction. "I wasn't about to go out with someone like that."

"My opinion of you knows no bounds, it must seem," Harry commented teasingly, laughing when she slapped his arm playfully and pouted at him. "Oh now look, you've made me miss my chance to finish my coffee," he pointed at the confetti their cherub had dumped on them and she laughed in reply to his own slight pout.

"The same thing happened to Cedric and I last year," her voice cracked slightly and her eyes widened. Harry's teasing mood vanished and his attention sharpened to exclude everything but the female before him in silent distress. "Oh...I hadn't even remembered that we..."

"Cho," Harry interrupted, voice smooth and silky and calming as he twisted just a hint of seduction - enough to capture and keep her attention - into his words, "it's alright that you don't remember everything."

"I - I know," she hesitated and bit her lip, playing with her fingers where they rested on the table, "I...did he, m - mention me at all before he died?" the change in subject was one that Harry let happen as he pulled up a wall around most of his emotions and let the memory play in the back of his mind. He sighed after a long moment of silence.

"There wasn't any time for him to say anything," he said softly, "the Cup was a portkey and we'd barely regained our balance before Voldemort had him killed." Cho winced and Harry sighed again, internally this time. "Cedric was very brave; he had enough time to realize what was happening but he didn't say a word to try and plea his way out. He might have been able to live a little longer if he'd done that...the curse might have missed him if he'd begged."

"So...who killed him? You-kno...V-Voldemort, or..."

"Peter Pettigrew," he said shortly. "The snivelling traitor that he is owes me a life debt; he couldn't have killed me even if he'd wanted to. His magic would have made the curse recoil before it could even leave his wand."

Cho blinked in confusing, she knew that Pettigrew had been killed by Sirius Black. "But didn't Black...?"

"I wish he had. Pettigrew is the reason my parents are dead."

TBC...

Chapter#28

"Dead...? What?" Cho blinked rapidly as she tried to assimilate the information that directly contradicted everything she had ever learned about Sirius Black and the conditions surrounding his imprisonment. "But didn't Black kill him?"

"Once again, I wish." Harry locked his fingers together and peered at Cho carefully. She would have dissolved into tears had they continued the conversation about Cedric, no matter what he said. What she really needed, above all else, was something to take her mind off the deceased Hufflepuff; something that she could really wrap her Ravenclaw brain around. "My parents knew months in advance that Voldemort was after them. They went into hiding under the Fidelius with Sirius as their secret keeper. I'm not sure when they decided to but, the fact of the matter is, they decided to switch to Pettigrew instead since it was too obvious that they would pick Sirius. Of course, they didn't know that Pettigrew was working for the Dark Lord and so it came as quite a surprise when he showed up at their doorstep that Halloween."

Cho's eyes had narrowed as she listened - no doubt going over all the facts he was giving her with careful attention to logic and detail. When he finished, she nodded. The only problem with his story was... "How do you know all this is true?"

"Well that's obvious, isn't it?" Harry's lips curled sardonically. "Pettigrew was there the night Voldemort returned. That and I'd met Sirius in my third year and he'd shown me Pettigrew - who openly admitted what he'd done. I spared the bastard's life which is why he owes me a life debt. He got away before we could hand him into the Ministry, of course, and that's the reason Sirius is still on the run."

"But why was it so obvious that they would pick Sirius Black?"

"He was my father's best friend," Harry replied. Her eyes widened and he continued blithely, "He's also my godfather - sent me my Firebolt and everything."

"Godfather?" Her eyes were wide in surprise. "Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"That's...that's...wow." She shook her head, at a loss for words. She couldn't remember what had happened following his defeat of the Dark Lord but she could remember hearing about the trial later on - when she was about five or six - after they'd gone through everyone else and Black had been in Azkaban awaiting trial for nearly five years. "I don't think you could have said anything else as mind-boggling as that, Harry."

"How about the sorting hat wanted me in Slytherin?"

She gaped and he chuckled. Her eyes narrowed at him and he went silent, smiling apologetically. She accepted his silent apology and turned over this new startling revelation thoughtfully. It would certainly explain why her sister liked him and why he had split away from his friends - Granger and the youngest Weasley boy. It also explained how he had known exactly what to say to make her at ease after her almost-breakdown about Cedric.

"Are you alright now?" Harry asked with a small amused smile. She wanted to smack him for a moment, for smiling when they had just come from such an awful topic, but she saw the glint of warning in his eyes that said he would not tolerate that. She wondered idly, as she replied that she was fine and sipped at her tea, if he realized quite how powerful an effect he had on people.

"That's good," he continued once he had received her answer. "Cho...how would you like to come with me for a bit of political manoeuvring?"

She raised an eyebrow at him curiously. His knowledge of pureblood rumours had sufficiently upset the Slytherins and crushed Parkinson's little spitting match nearer the school. His previously small smile turned into a faintly feral and vicious smirk. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just a meeting at the Three Broomsticks," he replied vaguely, glancing out the steamy window briefly as he appeared to try and

stop himself from laughing. "It promises to be interesting, at the very least."

"Alright," she stood and waited for him to pull out a galleon and leave it on the table to cover their orders, "let's go to this meeting of yours." Rita Skeeter shifted somewhat nervously, glancing at the door periodically. She was wearing the plainest casual robes she had - a simply slate-grey with faint swirls in dark blue on the under-robe that could be seen as the outer parted at the front - and had left her acid green quill at home along with most of her other, more gaudy, things. She thought she could use some new, more fashionable boots, but knew that hers were just fine nonetheless. She reached down into her pocket and fingered the bit of parchment there - soft from being bent and folded so many times - anxiously. This was going to be her first bit of work in months and she wasn't about to be picky about the subject, especially if the careful little hints of compensation in the letter were anything to go by.

"Ms Skeeter," a voice rumbled. She looked up, startled, into dancing emerald eyes shadowed by inky hair, "a...pleasure to see you again."

"Mr Potter!" She jumped a little and glanced briefly at the girl beside him - her eyes unwittingly dancing with interest even as she logically decided not to pay much attention to the obvious test of her ability to remain on the straight-and-narrow side of reporting. "I hadn't seen you come in."

"Madame Rosmerta has a side entrance she sometimes lets people in when they want to avoid the crowd at the bar but still wish to visit." She could tell he wasn't going to explain why he felt the need to know something like that and so remained surprisingly (even to herself) silent as he ushered his companion to sit down and then took the side of the bench farthest from the window in their little booth.

She watched as he settled and folded his hands on the table. Her eyes widened slightly at the signet ring on his hand and the other strange blue-jewelled ring on the opposite hand but made no comment. This was his show to run and she could do nothing but wait for him to be ready.

"You will be printing the true story of what happened at the Triwizard Tournament," he stated abruptly. She looked up sharply, taking note of the tense lines etched on his face and the flash of feral light in the Avada Kadavra eyes. "It will be printed in The Quibbler, by the grace of the editor's daughter, Ms Luna Lovegood. You will do this for free and you will kindly not use that poorly disguised Quick Quotes Quill you undoubtably brought despite my specific instructions not to."

She gulped, wilting under the stern and knowing stare. Certainly, she'd left the acid-green variety of her favourite quill at home but she hadn't been aware that muggle-raised Harry Potter would realize it came in other colours.

He continued in a calmer tone but his voice was still filled with an unflinching resolve. "I have arranged for my account manager to directly deposit one hundred galleons from my personal account upon satisfactory completing of the article. Is this acceptable to you, Ms Skeeter?"

"Yes," she breathed, eyes wide at the mere mention of such a large sum of money for a single story, "that's perfectly all right although...you do realize no one will believe you if this story is printed in The Quibbler?"

"They will read it," Harry replied, eyes dancing in dark amusement. "That is all I need, really. I do this more to annoy Dolores Umbridge than anything else. She will undoubtably ban it and the students and subsequently their parents will be almost guaranteed to read it and question the validity of The Daily Prophet if their children have complained of her as much as I believe they have."

"Oh, they'll read it," the girl who had accompanied him said. Her eyes were dark with both vicious delight and sorrow and she smirked faintly. "With the way she bans everything worthwhile, I have no doubt that the students will be even more eager to read the article and even more likely to believe something that the Ministry is trying so hard to silence."

"And if I don't agree?" she tossed the words out into their conversation with an arched eyebrow. She was impressed by his little

charade, she had to admit but, honestly, Potter acting Slytherin? It was a ridiculous concept and a tenuous story at best.

"Then I'll tell the Ministry about your little unregistered talent. I'm sure the Prophet would pay plenty for an insider's report of Azkaban. And, before you try and worm your way out of this, I'll have you know that I'm perfectly aware of certain spells that can tell the difference between a person who's used their talent multiple times and a person who's just learnt."

She felt a shiver run up her spine and averted her gaze from the hardened emerald orbs. So it was true; Potter truly was this way, now. The little mudblood girl wasn't the brains behind it all. Though she wondered if his dear friend was aware that her hard-earned blackmail was being used by another. Rita quickly decided she didn't care and pulled out her old Quick Quotes Quill from when she had first started out as a writer. The weathered but workable old feather was black with just the tip a vivid green so as to remind her that it wasn't a normal quill and she smiled fondly to herself as she positioned it over a fresh roll of parchment she'd bought specifically for the occasion. The old quill shivered and ink welled up at its tip as it carefully poised itself to write. It was her tamest quill and wrote with the same sincerity she had started out with - back before she had begun writing just for the sake of being the headline and getting the most money for her work, regardless of who she was harming.

She belatedly realized he had told her not to use a Quick Quotes Quill and glanced up nervously only to see his lips quirk in vague amusement. "Such a pretty feeling, that quill has," he murmured. "Far better than that other quill you brought." She frowned in confusion but was relieved that he hadn't decided to find another writer for her transgression.

As he told his story, she belatedly realized that she had brought another Quick Quotes Quill and wondered how he had known. He must have noticed the odd look of consternation that flickered across her face for he paused in the middle of describing the after-math of his encounter and stared at her expectantly, ignoring the Quill as it trailed off and hovered almost anxiously as it waited for her to prompt it to continue. "My familiar told me you'd brought one," he said simply.

She glanced over sharply and he smirked. "It was fairly obvious what you were thinking. Paladine can blend into her surroundings and, as she is a serpent, I can speak to her. She hung around to watch you pack through your bedroom window and reported back to me on her way back to the school."

"Your familiar!" she exclaimed sharply, eyes darting around as she suddenly realized that the dangerous creature could be anywhere with such a talent. He dipped his head and smirked rather proudly as he reached out a hand and brushed it along what appeared to be thin-air. The space on the table rippled as the silvery serpent appeared and folded her wings more comfortably about her long sinuous body. Bright yellow eyes peered up with sly intelligence and the Coatl hissed at her briefly before turning and casually draping herself about her master's shoulders. "Your true familiar?"

"Yes," he nodded briefly. "We have a mental connection already though it's hardly used unless she is a fair distance away as I am a parseltongue."

Rita looked at the beautiful specimen of a familiar with a greater respect and care now. It was so rare for magical folk to have familiars nowadays. In fact, she could probably only name a less than a handful off the top of her head and not much more with research. It had been common in the old days of magic but only the most powerful of witches and wizards ever had one anymore. Technically, every witch or wizard had a familiar somewhere but few had the resources to actually find them.

"Shall we continue?" The girl beside Harry asked impatiently. She had admired the serpent with a gentle smile when she had revealed herself but now that the winged beast had settled herself imperiously on her master's shoulder she was ready to be finished with the interview.

Rita hurriedly urged her Quill to continue and Harry started up where he had left off. They finished and she gathered up her supplies, scanning over the rough-draft and side-notes her Quill had jotted down at her request. She quickly asked for a few more details here and there and then thanked Harry and stood. He was at his feet

before she'd even managed to get out of her seat and he held out his arm to escort her in a seemingly trained reaction.

"Cho, if you don't mind..." He glanced at his companion for permission and she nodded her head simply. He turned to Rita again and watched her carefully. If he'd felt at all annoyed with his actions, he didn't show it and she hesitantly allowed him to lead her to the less-known side entrance. His familiar watched her every movement with bright eyes that glittered like glass marbles and she shivered involuntarily at the cold distaste that she could see in them. Harry held out her cloak for her and she tied it tightly about her neck and pulled on her gloves. He held the door open for her and hissed faintly to his familiar. The serpentine form flapped and Rita jumped at the weight of the silvery serpent settling, now nearly invisible, on her shoulders.

"Paladine will be escorting you back to your apartment to ensure that nothing happens to you or your story." The implied threat that if she dared to double-cross him and provide more fuel for the Prophet was enough that she trembled even though she was still quite warm. "Have a pleasant evening, Ms Skeeter." He smiled disarmingly and the door shut.

Jaenelle hummed softly to herself as she accepted the package of letters from her daughter. Rex, being the proud and very Shadow-like avian he was, ruffled his feathers irritably the moment she had relieved him of his parcel. He sent a clipped hello along a spear thread and then took his leave (in search of, no doubt, some food after the tiring journey through the Darkness). This package was later and felt a tad heavier than usual and she was curious as to what Kirra had sent along this time.

"Is that from Earth?" her son's voice was curious but in an odd way that made her glance over with a single raised eyebrow, prompting him silently to the reason why he cared at all. "I've missed the little imp."

"It's from your sister." Jaenelle watched the curiosity in his golden-green eyes sharpen with something like hope and flicker to the package briefly before returning to meet her own sapphire gaze.

"Is there anything in there for me?"

The Twilight's Dawn flared faintly as it prodded the package for any 'tags' that indicated who they belonged to. She found one that had the distinct sense of Lucien on it and calmly opened the larger box to remove the unmarked parchment envelope. She offered it to her son and he accepted it with carefully disguised eagerness (a thing she only noticed because he was her son and Witch was duly curious as to the reason behind the odd emotion concerning a simple letter from his younger sister).

Lucien made as if to leave but she stared at him with Witch glimmering within her eyes and he promptly opened it on the spot, unfolding the parchment within and scanning it quickly. "Who's it from?" she asked mildly.

"Kirra," he glanced up with a faintly amused smirk. "Who else would it be from?" He was lying, she could tell. Still, it amused her to let him have his illusions and so she smiled easily and waved him away. He bowed politely (he had always been odd like that) and she watched him retreat back into the Hall where he would undoubtedly pursue his mysterious letter further.

Males, she huffed internally in amusement. Their naivety never ceases to amuse me.

Just within the Hall, Lucien had secreted away into a hidden alcove he'd used often as a child and even still at his current age. He opened the perfect square of parchment and carefully read the contents, feeling smug satisfaction and fondness bubble up with each stroke of ink against the letter.

Lucien SaDiablo,

You must excuse the lateness of my reply but I find myself rather behind in my Christmas replies this year.

Your gift is beautiful and I enjoyed the book that accompanied it immensely. The charm to prevent its removal was an interesting touch, I must say, though I can't seem to figure out who it is tied to

(as I read that this particular charm needed to be tied to someone in particular so that the object in question can be removed by someone). (Lucien smirked unrepentantly at the veiled jab of annoyance)

I also find myself in your debt for that recipe you taught me. It has worked wonders (He could tell that his pretty little witch had felt distinctly uncomfortable in writing that as she hurried onto a different topic) and yet, despite the ease with which I have been able to replicate your brew, I have been unable to find adequate ingredient substitutions for the brews in my own books. If you wouldn't mind, I would greatly appreciate some help or suggestions.

Sincerely,

Hermione Granger

The letter then listed several common beginners Craft books and beneath each title had jotted names of different brews that she had failed to complete. His mind automatically thought to each recipe and to what she would be having trouble with, his faint smirk widening as he realized the time it would take to go to find proper substitutions. He chuckled in amusement; no doubt the pretty little witch would want to pay for the ingredients herself and no doubt she would want to be with him to inspect the quality of the unfamiliar ingredients he would tell her could suffice for her brews. It made him almost giddy with the thought of so much time spent with the White-jeweled witch. He sincerely hoped that she would loosen up and forgive him for the minor removal-prevention spell he'd woven into his gift to her by that time; it simply wouldn't do for him to be stuck with a grumpy witch for such a length of time. Especially not when the grumpy witch was one whom he wanted to have trust him and consider him a friend (the more went unspoken as he knew it would be a long ways off before that was allowed).

He reached out with his mind for his sister's messenger. The proud eagle met his spear thread irritably. / Yes? ./

/ When are you returning? ./

/ Soon. / He could feel the annoyed curiosity that replaced a spoken question and hastened to respond before Rex could decide he wasn't in the mood for returning more replies than was strictly necessary.

/ Would you please take a letter to the White-jeweled witch, Hermione Granger, for me? ./

/ Fine/ he replied curtly. The spear thread snapped and Lucien frowned to himself at the mental string of the abrupt cut of communication. Still, he was lucky enough to have caught the eagle in a good mood (or as good as he ever got when visiting the Tri-Realms) and he wasn't about to waste this chance by not having a letter complete by the time Rex was ready to leave.

Lucien would lock himself up in his quarters and emerge only minutes before Rex's departure with a carefully folded letter, fingers still smudged with ink and dusted lightly with sand used for blotting. His parents would understand the smirk on his lips and the glimmer in his eyes but they would let him believe he had fooled them all. Jaenelle would watch him hastily excuse himself from the hall with laughing sunny-blue eyes and his father would restrain the smirk and laughter until he was beyond the range of his wife's senses and then hold her up as she collapsed into a fit of giggles. They would then spend the rest of the afternoon holed up in their bedroom, Daemon unable to resist the sight of his wife so shining with happiness.

"How was Quidditch practise?" Harry's voice mingled with Neville's as they both turned to her the moment she was within hearing range. She was wearing her school robes and her hair smelled of lilacs from her shampoo and yet she was still splattered in mud and looking miserable. Harry scooted over, making room for her to sit down and smiling faintly when she leaned against him for warmth.

"It was a nightmare," she grumbled, accepting the bowl of steaming soup that Neville placed in front of her and gripping the mug of hot chocolate that Harry had poured for her the moment he had caught her psychic scent entering the castle. "Poor Angelina was nearly in tears by the end of it."

Harry winced, shooting a glance at an equally miserable Ron who was made even more miserable looking by Harry's obvious concern for Ron's little sister over Ron himself. He too was covered in mud, having forgone a shower in the change rooms, and Harry smirked as he saw Hermione inch away discreetly. His attention returned to Ginny when she shivered and his Warlord Prince instincts jumped at the chance to help. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she replied, happier now that she'd eaten the bowl of hot soup and was now working on a slice of chicken pot pie. "It's Ron who's in trouble. He can only save a goal as long as he doesn't think anyone's watching him. Sloper and Kirke hit the bludgers only occasionally and mostly at the rest of us." She scowled and returned to her supper, leaving Harry and Neville to exchange glances over her head.

'Transformation practise?' Neville mouthed.

Harry nodded. He could switch between his forms with incredible ease thanks to his bloodmagic ritual but Ginny, Blaise and Neville needed to practise as often as possible before they'd be able to make the first transformation on their own and allow it to imprint itself on their magic for easy use. Ginny was exceptionally talented at the transformation, having transformed all her body parts individually and was now working on simultaneously transforming them; which was proving to be a bit of a challenge but a much welcomed one.

Neville and Blaise, on the other hand, seemed to be having trouble transferring their respective Affinity and Empathy into their animal forms. It was proving to be a bit of a block in managing complete transformations.

Still, despite all difficulty, it was incredibly relaxing to have brief glimpses of the simpler minds of their other forms and was, as such, exactly the thing Ginny needed this night.

"Ginny," Harry began, curling an arm around her and meeting the faintly annoyed look she was sending him for interrupting her meal, "would you like to have a bit of a group practise tonight? In the Room?" It was obvious he meant the Room of Requirement.

Her eyes brightened and she looked between the two males on either side of her eagerly. "Can we go now?"

Neville laughed a little. "Well," he said in amusement, "I think we should at least tell Blaise what we're planning, don't you?"

Ginny flushed faintly and then glanced at the Slytherin table. Blaise seemed to sense her gaze (indeed, he'd probably sensed her emotions wafting in his direction) and looked up, tilting his head fractionally in question. Ginny nodded toward the entrance and raised an eyebrow at him expectantly. He smiled vaguely and nodded, turning his attention back to something one of the other Slytherin's was saying before his lack of interest could be noted.

Harry idly fingered a strand of her long red hair before retracting his hand and getting to his feet. She turned to watch him stand, eyeing him curiously. He smiled faintly at her and popped off a slight bow. "I'll see you tonight; after you've eaten and changed from your school robes."

"Where are you off to?" she asked warily.

He grinned. "I need to speak with your brothers about their little project. Since they seem to feel the need to make me a partner in such an endeavour, it only makes sense that I check in on my investment every once in awhile."

"You're their investor?" Neville gaped at Harry. "But that must have cost..." his eyes flashed as he went through the mental calculations of what Fred and George's experiments must have cost to build, "...just under a thousand galleons!"

"And I hope it stays under that, that's all I gave them."

Neville's mouth - previously open slightly in amazement - snapped shut as realization sank in. "The Tri-Wizard Tournament; your winnings."

Harry nodded and smiled quickly before turning on heel and leaving the Great Hall. Neville sighed heavily and glanced at Ginny with an expression of mock exasperation. "He would be the one to encourage them, wouldn't he?"

He received only laughter in response from his female companion.

"She's made another one..."

"How many of those does she need?"

The whispers of her dorm-mates would have been easily heard by someone even on the other side of the door into her dorm and yet she continued to hum a little tune as she hung up the sparkling dream-catcher above her bed. It was a dream-catcher of the magical variety and, as such, a multitude of pin-prick sized blue beads wove in seemingly random patterns - occasionally hovering for a few seconds in the shape of what appeared to be a rune - where one would normally see the static interwoven bits of string.

This particular addition was number seventy-two of the collection that were strung all across her room in the fourth-year-girl's dorm. Each year had a small common room off of which lay a small bedroom (containing a bookshelf, desk and chair, and a simple metal-wrought four-poster bed) as it was believed in Ravenclaw that it was better to have a place where one could study with absolute silence than to be forced to share a room with however many other people were in your year. Naturally, no one in Ravenclaw wanted to bother another student but these things happened and so the dorms had been changed over the years to accommodate the fourteen lesser common rooms (seven each for the two genders) and the one house common room.

So, really, it shouldn't have been a problem if Luna Lovegood had decided to add another dream-catcher to her bedroom and yet it was. The problem was, although she hung the dream-catchers in her room, they never seemed to stay there. Somehow (and it was clearly not Luna's doing as one student had followed her around all week after finding one seemingly permanently stuck to the cover of one of her history of magic texts and had seen nothing despite the fact that no

less than ten dream-catchers were found hidden that week) they managed to find their way into every part of the castle imaginable. A fifth year boy still swore that he'd found one in his boxers once but no one had been able to prove it and Luna had simply turned a cold stare on him when he'd accused her, momentarily losing her dreamy-eyed quality and turning into an incensed and sharp-eyed witch who had grown highly annoyed with the current line of questioning, and the matter had been laid to rest.

She finished hanging the sparkling ornament and then turned to her dorm-mates who looked startled at the sudden movement from the misty-eyed girl. She smiled vaguely at them and the door to her room slammed shut. The noise would startle the girls outside and send them hurrying away so they would never know that she had simply flicked her wand behind her back and had made the doors slam shut that way. She shrugged as she pondered the thought and turned back to observe her growing collection.

"Hm..." She hummed thoughtfully. "They seem to be getting awfully blue lately. What do you think Henry?" She turned to the corner, where her bookshelf sat, and waited. There was a long moment of silence before she turned her gaze back thoughtfully and nodded. "Yes I suppose I do see that as well. Still, it will be a shame to have to take down those ones. They always seem to sparkle, no matter how many cobwebs they accumulate."

She tilted her head to one side and frowned. "I hardly think you should be giving me advice, Henry. You're just as bad as he is, sometimes, you know." She turned back to her bookshelf and reached out to poke Henry. The dull grey puffskein squeaked in response and glared at its owner with glimmering turquoise eyes. Luna smiled brilliantly and gently rubbed its 'head' (it was hard to tell with a creature that was, essentially, a ball of fur with four tiny legs tucked up near its body somewhere). The little thing made an odd mewling noise and curled up so that it appeared to be just a ball of grey fur sitting atop a small pile of books on shelf.

Only Luna Lovegood, it would seem, would have a puffskein as a familiar. Only Luna would name said puffskein Henry, of all things.

TBC...

As an aside, I'd also like to thank everyone who reviewed 'Same and Yet Different'. I'd needed to get that out of my system and, naturally, it seemed to be the last thing I was going to get out for some time after! Well, hopefully this doesn't turn out as badly as I thought it would, eh?

Oh! And a happy christmas and new year and every other holiday greeting that comes around this time of the year!

Chapter #29

Harry felt the electric discharge that came from his transformation and sighed in relief. It was as if the shift into his Raijin was all that was needed to relieve the stress; as if the static energy was his stress and it was put to use rather than clinging to him like a cloak. He swung bright crimson eyes to watch his best friend warm up with leisurely, individual limb transformations. Her two friends (only one of them a friend of his as well - though he was cordial with Blaise) were doing much the same.

It amused his senses to smell the shift between Ginny's light human scent with the lingering and slightly offensive scent of her shampoo and the easy feminine musk of her fox form. The scent of fox lingered in the air and he knew she had moved onto the main portion of her practice. The other two males were moving onto their main practice points as well and Harry swung his tail experimentally, watching sparks leap into the air and cackle as if they wanted to be lightning but couldn't. The blood magic only grew stronger the more he used it and Harry took great pleasure in feeling the lines of power beneath his fur pulse in tune with his heartbeat.

A cry of surprise and joy shook him from his examination and he turned to see Ginny with both arms fully transformed. She held the form for a moment longer before letting it go with a great huff of breath she probably hadn't been aware she was holding. Harry grinned as best his Raijin was able and crossed the distance between them swiftly to bump his head affectionately beneath her human palm. She smoothed his fur, smirking when it popped right back into position, and gently polished the blue stone imbedded into his forehead. The focal stone shone briefly in response to his pleasure and the faint green lightning bolt at its centre glimmered into full view before returning to its more dormant and less noticeable state.

"It's not so hard, now that I know the problem," Ginny informed him with a pleased smile playing across her lips. "I kept thinking of them as separate limbs but they're really connected to each other."

Harry shifted and his bloodmagic responded by locking up his form once again. The simplistic ritual didn't need to be activated anymore

and he could shift between forms without help from the lines carved into his skin. Really, now all the bloodmagic was good for was if he gained another form and wanted to advance his bloodmagic. He doubted he would and so the dangerous ritual was now nothing more than a fast-track to the transformation into a beast he hadn't been able to identify properly at first.

"I'm only sorry I couldn't be more help," he professed, ducking his head faintly as his instincts shifted in anxiety over failure to serve. "But I never really did this the hard way..."

"Don't kid yourself, Harry," Neville scoffed. "I would hardly call a bloodmagic ritual the easy way."

"Indeed," Blaise agreed with a faint nod. The dark male stared at Harry and the young Warlord Prince shifted into his other form, watching the three return to their practice.

In an odd sort of way, Harry found everything easier to deal with when in his Raijin form. The beast had simplistic ideals; it thought that Ginny belonged to its 'pack' and, through extension, Blaise and Neville also belonged to it. When Harry was in this form, his Blood instincts lessened to a manageable state. Unless, of course, he was in the rut. In that case, being in his Raijin form only enhanced those instincts to their extreme.

The Raijin rose from its sleep and Harry and it merged in the way that only a bloodmagic ritual could cause. The other three would always remain in complete control over their animagus forms but Harry and the Raijin would always merge when they shifted - it was the only way he would be able to with his ritual tying the form to his magic and to his blood. The Raijin surveyed its pack and then turned to the wide expanse of open space and stormy clouds revealed by the recently formed cave-entrance to the practice room they were using.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and the Raijin cast one last searching look at its pack. They were occupied and the thunder beast decided that they would be safe enough if he took a bit of a run in the clouds. Lightning cackled along his fur and he flash-changed into

lightning and leapt into the clouds, dancing with the natural lightning and creating a pleasant cacophony of deafening booms as he did.

Within the cave, Ginny looked out and up from her fully changed legs. It seemed as though Harry's animagus was precisely what the older teen needed. It made her proud to know that she had been the one to come up with the idea and make the potion that had helped him. Even knowing he'd resorted to bloodmagic to complete the change, she couldn't fault him for wanting the peace of mind that came from having that other form comforting him. She smiled and returned to her practice - all her previous upsets forgotten and only a will to catch up to her best friend remaining.

Fred flopped down on the couch beside Harry, laughing when the other boy toppled over onto his lap. George followed his twin quickly, causing their little pile-up to roll off the edge and land on the plush carpet before the fireplace. Harry grunted as the wind was knocked out of him and Fred snickered from his perch on top of the pile. George whined at the bottom and shoved his brother and friend off with a loud huff. "Oi!"

"What do you two want?" Harry asked, smirking up at them as his eyes twinkled merrily. Fred beamed at the expression on his surrogate-brother's face and hugged him discreetly, ruffling his hair as a pretence.

"Ginny not around?" Fred asked, glancing around for his sister who seemed to be a permanent shadow for the green-eyed male whenever she was able to.

"Not at the moment," Harry replied as he settled himself in front of the fireplace, peering up at Fred on the couch and George lounging somewhere in-between. "She's off with Blaise - borrowing his arithmancy and potions textbooks again, I think."

"Zabini?" Fred felt his face twist into an automatic grimace. George whopped him on the back of his head and he grinned apologetically at his twin. It had been a response born of seeing the crimson and gold surrounding them, not because he disliked the boy. Being in

Gryffindor meant that he couldn't show affection for any of their friends in Slytherin without getting torn up and down by their siblings and parents (though, thinking about it, Ginny had never shared in that practise). "Well, never mind that. Did you happen to see their practise?"

"No, but I'd heard of it," Harry said, tilting his head curiously. "Was it really that bad?"

"They're going to be slaughtered," Fred replied solemnly. George scowled at the two of them.

"Ginny's not bad," he defended their youngest sister with a fierce glare that seemed somewhat out of place in the situation. Fred shot his twin a questioning look and Harry did the same. George realized how he was acting and sat back with a pensive look on his face; he didn't normally care about defending his family from one another. "Actually," he hastened to add, "I dunno how she got so good, seeing how we never let her play with us."

"She's been breaking into your broom shed in the garden since the age of six and taking each of your brooms out in turn when you weren't looking," Harry informed them simply, eyes flicking between them in amusement.

"Oh," George's eyes widened. Fred was mildly impressed with their littlest sibling and silently promised to perhaps pay a little more attention to the sole female in their family. They didn't particularly love their relatives, but perhaps they would acquiesce to Harry's interest in this case. Particularly because Ginny sometimes looked at them with suspiciously knowing eyes - as if she were on the cusp of differentiating the two of them but hadn't quite got there. "Well - that'd explain it."

"It would," Harry watched them and Fred felt as if the younger knew precisely what they were thinking. "Has Ron saved a goal yet?"

"Well, he can do it if he doesn't think anyone's watching him," said Fred. He rolled his eyes in exasperation - the sting at being banned from his favourite sport making the sting of his brother's failure worse.

“So all we have to do is ask the crowd to turn their backs and talk among themselves every time the Quaffle goes up his end on Saturday.”

Harry didn't speak but the bright emerald of his eyes compelled Fred to continue. “You know, Quidditch was about the only thin in this place worth staying for.”

“You've got exams coming!” The feminine voice broke the unspoken conversation between the three boys and Fred turned to Hermione with an annoyed expression he knew that Harry was too polite to give her.

“We're not fussed about NEWTs like some people,” George informed her bluntly, sneering slightly in a way that was more Fred than George.

“The Snackboxes are ready to roll, we found out how to get rid of those boils, just a couple of drops of Murtlap essence sorts them, Lee put us on to it,” Fred continued, casting a look at Harry. The younger teen flashed a pleased look and the eldest of the twins felt a warmth inside him bubble at the confidence their benefactor had in them and the pleasure their success brought him.

“I dunno if I even want to watch this match. If Zacharias Smith beats us, I might have to kill myself,” George said with a grimace.

“Kill him, more like,” Harry muttered to Fred. The elder snorted in amusement and Harry's lips curled into a feral smile. Hermione gaped at them, her hands clutching a textbook as if it were her lifeline to sanity - to a world where grades were important above all else.

“Harry!”

“What is it, Hermione?” Harry turned rather unkind eyes upon her. Fred watched her displeasure bristle up about her like a shield as she sniffed and stared at the twin's self-adopted brother as if he would realize he was mistaken and apologize for his rudeness. The boy did no such thing and continued to stare at her expectantly. She flushed and her next words were flustered and contained a shrill note.

"It's just a game! You shouldn't take it so seriously!"

"Mind your own business, Hermione," Harry said shortly. "I don't question your continued exchange with Lucien and I don't go poking around your attempts at finding the extent of my dealings in Pureblood circles." The harsh inhale gave away that she had been trying that. Harry's eyes narrowed and Fred casually placed a hand on the younger's shoulder - supporting and comforting him. He felt the muscle beneath his hand relax marginally in thanks.

"Leave us alone, Granger," George grouched. His features looked to be carved from stone and he spoke in a flat tone. "We were having a private conversation."

The young witch was ready to protest. Fred could tell that much. But she silenced herself at the last moment and wandered away with her eyes averted and her hands clenched tightly about her text. Harry watched her go stiffly before he relaxed fully, leaning his head back against Fred's thigh.

"Bitch," George hissed. Fred shot his twin a startled look and Harry reached out to smack the other lightly.

"Don't be crude," he said. "She's still a lady, no matter how nosy."

Fred was impressed at Harry's ability to remain polite in even the uncomfortable conversations. He was just as angry as Fred and George for Hermione's unwarranted spying but he was still refusing to allow anyone to badmouth the girl. It was a feat that the twins couldn't rightfully hope to manage with their temperaments. They made it very clear when they were upset with someone - none of Harry's silent disapproval until he could no longer keep up the pretence. Quite frankly, Fred was surprised Harry had remained friends with Hermione and Ron for as long as he had. Still, it was Harry and if anyone was capable of such things, it would be the young Lord Potter.

Harry settled beside Ginny at breakfast the next morning with the expression of a cat that'd got the cream. His emerald eyes sparkled in bright amusement as he greeted his red-haired best friend and began to help himself to orange juice and a platter of food that had snapped into place before him the moment he had sat down. It seemed that the house-elves had begun to realize that he needed more food now that he had an animagus form bound to his blood.

Ginny eyed his look of smug satisfaction warily. "What's gotten you so happy?"

"Post's here," he ignored her and smiled brilliantly at Hedwig when she soared down alongside a screech owl bearing a long cylindrical tube. "Had a nice flight, my girl?"

"It was very nice, thank you, my Bonded," she replied cheerfully, fluffing up her feathers and leaning into the caress of his hand. Much like Paladine had refused to stop calling him 'Master,' Hedwig now refused to call him anything but 'Bonded.' "Your copy has just arrived and I've convinced the others to take your letters to the house-elves. They will not permit one of their charges to receive harmful mail if it is to pass through their hands first."

"Hm," Harry hummed a reply vaguely and accepted his small package and sent the other owl on his way with a strip of bacon clutched tightly in its beak. "Thank you for that."

"You are welcome, my Bonded." Hedwig tilted her head to one side and continued to speak to him. "Paladine wonders when Diodium will be practising with her again. She complains that she is very much out of shape and that training up a proper familiar will be good for her." The abrupt change in subject would have been odd coming from a human but as an owl and a bonded familiar Hedwig had the mental capacity to make such large leaps in logic that even Harry wouldn't follow them.

He reached out with his mind and brushed against his first familiar's. She wrapped around him like a warm blanket and he smiled at the affection in the mental embrace as he replied, "Susan will be bringing

him around to classes full-time any day now. We will start again then. She worries that he will be too distracted with the thought of being able to follow her all the time to pay attention to the lessons.”

Harry knew Hedwig wouldn't understand the other familiar's inability to concentrate. She had been separate from her Bonded for many years as well, after all, and she had lived away from him even after she'd found him. Paladine had no qualms about leaving her Master behind - the knowledge that he would be back was enough - and so she wouldn't understand Diodium's eagerness either. Harry understood though - a male familiar had similar thought patterns to a Warlord Prince - and didn't fault the lion for his anxiety nor Susan for her decision to postpone their lessons.

“Well?” Ginny's impatient voice rang beside him. Harry turned to her and smirked a little when a tiny blue head poked its way out from an inner pocket in her robes. Baron glared at him - instantly shifting from his usual indifference to fury at his human being ignored. Harry held out the cylindrical package and watched her take it curiously and open it, staring down at his faintly smirking countenance on the cover of the March edition of *The Quibbler*.

“Harry Potter Speaks Out at Last: The Truth About He Who Must Not Be Named and the Night I Saw Him Return?” Ginny's gaze sharpened. She flipped to the article and began reading, eyebrows rising at the tone of the normally acidic Rita Skeeter.

“It's good, isn't it?” said Luna. She'd drifted over from the Ravenclaw table and wedged herself between the twins (who were sitting across from Harry and scheming quietly). “It came out yesterday, I asked Dad to send you a free copy. I expect that the letters Lady Hedwig diverted were all from readers.” She smiled vaguely and then looked at Fred, eyes going clear for a moment before settling to their usual misty appearance.

“Thank you, Miss Lovegood,” Harry said. His lips curled into an affectionate smile. “I don't believe you've met Fred and George Weasley?” He ignored the looks the twins sent him. He loved them dearly - they were closer than brothers, the three of them - but he felt that, deep down, they needed to reach out to other people. He still

respected their distrust of anyone outside of their threesome - understood their concerns, even - but Luna was different. She drifted through life like the mist that clouded her crystalline eyes. He knew she could tell the difference between the twins and he knew that she understood them better than they did themselves. She glanced over slowly and smiled at him with a brief flash of mischief and appreciation in her eyes. He returned the smile and gently kicked Fred beneath the table.

"Hn," Fred grunted and shot the emerald-eyed teen a look. Harry tilted his head towards Luna pointedly. George interpreted the look and accepted the silent encouragement before his twin.

"Good day, Lady Lovegood," he greeted in a courtier's voice. He even managed to perform an impromptu bow in his seat for her. "And how are you this fine morning?"

She smiled vaguely at him and said simply, "Henry approves of your pranks."

"Henry?" Even George - who normally went with the flow - faltered.

"My familiar," she replied. From her pocket she withdrew what appeared to be a grey lump of fluff and set it on the table where it did nothing more than sit there lifelessly. "Henry, be nice to Messrs Fred and George." Her lips were curled in sardonic amusement.

Fred leaned forward boldly and poked the bundle of fluff. It didn't twitch and he poked it again, only to pull back with a yelp. Two spots of color bloomed in the matted grey fur as the puffskein glowered with bright turquoise eyes at the elder of the twins, letting out a string of high-pitched, indignant squeaks. George snickered and performed a second bow. "Sir Henry," he intoned formally.

"It bit me?"

"Well, what did you expect him to do?" Luna inquired, frowning at Fred. "Let you poke him?"

"He's a puffskein!"

“He’s my familiar.”

“Children,” George interrupted, setting soothing hands on Luna’s shoulders and letting his chin rest atop her mane of pale blonde hair in order to peer at his twin, “don’t fight so.” Harry smiled at the scene, seeing a familiar flicker of emotion in the youngest twin’s eyes. Perhaps his twins weren’t as opposed to opening their world as they thought.

Luna preened under the attention - or, at least, as much preening as he’d ever seen her do. She scooped Henry up and set him on her lap. Harry sat up in his seat to follow the little fur-ball’s progression from lap to robe-pocket. “Well, at least one of you has grown up a little. I don’t think Hogwarts would have been able to stand for much longer with the way -”

“Your safe mail is arriving now, my Bonded,” Hedwig interrupted, turning her luminescent golden eyes upwards as the first of the owls swooped in. Harry turned abruptly from the conversation - startling all his friends with the exception of Luna.

It was lost knowledge - familiars had fallen out of practice hundreds of years ago - but courtesy dictated that one’s familiar always came first. Wizard-kind and their familiars were bonded soul-to-soul; ignoring a familiar was ignoring yourself and it had always been considered incredibly rude to interrupt someone when they were communicating with their partner. Naturally, you could ignore your familiar if you wanted to be polite to the people you were speaking with and no one would mind but it was almost ingrained to stop the conversation if a familiar interrupted.

Harry chose to pay attention to Hedwig over his friends this time because it was for good reason. The first sanctioned interview with the Boy-Who-Lived (Tri-Wizard tournament notwithstanding) was arriving and this was the response.

He quickly began sorting the mail, reaching out with his Sapphire to feel the emotions attached to the lingering magical signatures. If there were negative emotions aimed at him, he put it in a pile before Luna.

The younger witch smirked and pulled her wand out from behind her ear - flicking it with a muttered incantation and systematically setting them aflame in different colours. He put the positive letters before Ginny and she began rifling through them curiously, smiling in pleasure as more people voiced their support for her dear friend. The twins leaned forward, snatching some letters from Luna's grasp and snarling in indignant fury when they recognized surnames from Hogwarts. Their heads came together over Luna's as they began plotting vicious pranks against the children of the senders (or, at least, the ones who agreed with their parents). Luna obligingly leaned back to give them room.

"Well," Neville began (he had been watching in silent amusement up until this point, on Harry's other side), "this certainly seems to have cleared up a few concerns." He looked up from a letter that had been delivered to him amidst the clamour of Harry's owls. "My gran says that all the old matriarchs have sided with you." He smiled briefly. "I think it may have had something to do with Lady Zabini's adamant support and that tentative alliance between the Potter and Changs that's been whispered about."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." But the smirk gave Harry away.

That toad-woman is coming this way, my Master, Harry heard the subtle hissing coming from Paladine and felt her curl her way up his leg and into his lap. He brushed a hand down his robes as if ridding them of crumbs but his hand continued until it hit her smooth scales - invisible and finally rid of the skin she had been shedding the past few days.

"Thank you," he whispered softly, unwilling to utter a word in Parseltongue when Umbridge was coming closer.

'Tis my pleasure, my Master, she replied. Serpents couldn't understand other languages but she could hear his words through their link. Please, when the time is right, let me have this one.

"Yours," he muttered as he turned around smoothly to face the Hogwarts High Inquisitor. "Madam Umbridge," he said politely.

“What is all this, Mr Potter?” she inquired in a sickly sweet tone.

He smiled at her – eerily predatorily – but did not reply to her. He could tell that she was desperate to know what was going on but he wasn’t giving her the satisfaction of admitting he’d done something deliberately against her wishes.

Her eyes narrowed faintly and her cheek twitched as if the effort of keeping her veneer of friendliness was too much. “Why have you got all these letters, Mr Potter?” Harry ignored her, watching the students beyond turning in avid curiosity. He could see Cho among them, and Su with her fiancé – the latter’s eyes were frozen crystalline orbs and he could see Felix Vaisey watching the young female for the signal to interfere.

“I have received more mail than usual, Madame Umbridge,” Harry finally replied. His eyes shifted back to the short woman and he felt the electrifying presence of the Raijin peer out at her arrogantly – content in its knowledge of their superiority. “Luna, would you care to explain?”

She looked up from a rainbow-coloured flame she was currently using to burn and blinked her wide eyes. “About the article? I’m sure the woman can read for herself, Harry Potter.”

“Of course; how silly of me.” Luna shook her head as if exasperated by his apparent idiocy and returned to her previous activity. “Would you like a copy of the article, Madame?”

“Yes,” she said curtly.

Ginny passed over the copy she had finished reading. She had been watching the proceedings calmly – almost eerily so – and now she was watching the toad-like woman expectantly. Her brothers were watching with a silent hostility – restrained only by the warning look Harry sent them.

Umbridge took up the article, glancing at the cover briefly, and began to read.

Ron could see and hear Harry's conversations from where he took his breakfast. The red-head was eating silently, accompanied only by Hermione who was absorbed in one of her textbooks. He glanced at the girl and sighed, turning his eyes towards his once best friend.

Harry seemed happy, at least, without them. The ebon-haired teen was comfortably positioned between Ginny and Neville, across from the twins and a strange blonde-haired girl in Ravenclaw. The twins smiled – pleased in a way that Ron couldn't remember seeing on their faces unless they were near Harry, like they were now – and spoke to the younger male with an affection they wouldn't share even with their siblings.

Ginny was smirking at something Harry had passed her while Neville quietly followed the conversation around him.

The article had come as a surprise and Ron desperately wanted to read it. Of course, he couldn't simply go over and ask to read it. Not after Harry had so effectively dismissed them from his life. It seemed as though Harry had finally come out of the shell he'd lived in throughout his first four years at Hogwarts. The shell that Ron had worked so hard to break down had come crashing down around him while Harry emerged from the remains – powerful, confident, and no longer in need of a sidekick-friend.

Ron could see the aristocracy coming to life in Harry. He could see it in the way he carried himself and the way he dealt with others; could hear it in his voice; could feel it in the way the other had so solemnly dismissed his friendship when it had become too great a strain to keep up.

It wasn't Harry's fault – Ron could understand and admit that now. Harry had tried to introduce his true self to Ron but Ron hadn't wanted to listen. Harry had given up when it became apparent that he wasn't wanted for anything but the shell his friends had worked so hard to tear down – the same shell that had restricted the quintessential Harry for so many years.

Umbridge approached his old friend. Harry hadn't reacted visibly but for a rather terrifying smile. Ginny offered up the article with no prompting from the emerald-eyed boy. Her hand almost immediately reached into her pocket and withdrew a tiny jobberknoll – Baron, he thought she'd named it – which she proceeded to feed and play with absently while keeping a sharp eye on the High Inquisitor.

Not that she needed to. Ron looked around the hall. A small Asian girl at the Slytherin table was watching intently, curled under the arm of one of her house's chaser's, and her wand was lying on the table, under her hand and ready to move at a moment's notice. The chaser (Vaisey, he thought was the male's family name) was smoothing his hand down the girl's black hair in calming motions. His brothers were watching with furious expressions, restrained by – for all Ron could tell – a short look Harry had sent them. Cho Chang and Kirra SaDiablo at the Ravenclaw table had shifted their entire attentions to the Gryffindor table and they weren't moving but for their eyes which had followed Umbridge's journey from staff table to house table unerringly. The younger years all watched their hero for any sign of rebellion – ready to follow him when (and with Harry, it was always when) the time came.

“What's going on?” Hermione, it seemed, had finally come up from her book. The sudden quiet of the hall must have pulled her from her studying.

The ginger-haired male turned to face his companion. She was peering quizzically down at Harry – face set in an expression of polite interest over simmering hurt at being ignored. The Potter Heir didn't seem to notice nor did he seem to care. He had turned fully now, and had his hands folded as he observed Umbridge's reaction to the article.

“Weasley.” He turned at the sound of his name. Blaise Zabini stood behind him, eyes turned toward the youngest Weasley male even though his attention was clearly on Harry. “Would you like a copy of the article?”

Ron blinked in surprise. “What?”

"A copy of the article; would you like one?" Blaise repeated, this time withdrawing a copy of the Quibbler from his robes. "My mother sent several copies. I believe Harry told her to have one sent to you but she refuses to have contact with blood-traitors."

He felt the anger at the insult rising up and Blaise's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You seem to have forgotten the true meaning of blood-traitor. It was supposed to mean someone who betrayed their family and, as far as the rest of the school was concerned, up until this year, Harry Potter may as well have been a Weasley. The Zabini's do not appreciate this direct insult to our allies, the Potters."

He felt his mouth hang open slightly in disbelief. Blaise dropped the magazine carelessly and turned on heel. "Do remember, Weasley, that the Zabini family has, more than once, employed Ravus."

Ravus? The name sounded familiar and Ron frowned. He hadn't heard it in so long but he could remember a time when his father never seemed to come home without mentioning it.

"I can see I've confused you," Blaise sneered. "Ravus was and is the wizarding world's foremost assassin and hitman. He is the one responsible for getting a vampire into the Ministry and removing all those connected the werewolf and vampire registration legislature that they attempted to pass the year before we came to Hogwarts."

That was right! Ron could remember the nightmares he had after that incident. What was worse was Ravus had managed to convince a vampire Prince to accompany him and hadn't suffered in the slightest for it. He'd gone in, killed everyone at the meeting (those who had been trying to pass the new laws – all members of the Wizengamot), and left. There had been no magical or physical evidence that anyone had done anything to break in and only a letter left by Ravus himself, explaining what he had done and why, had told investigators who had done the crime.

The only reason Arthur Weasley had known was because he had been called in to inspect the muggle device that Ravus had left behind. It was some sort of electrical prod modified to run off of a

person's magic – to turn it against them and allow it to viciously attack the person being prodded.

Ron's eyes narrowed despite himself. "A threat?" he murmured, glancing at Hermione. She was still confused, he could tell.

"A promise," Blaise returned. His face smoothed into a calm mask. "Just bear that in mind, if you plan on snooping into my or Harry's affairs. Or if you plan on making any unpleasant comments toward either of us." He looked toward Harry and Umbridge, clearly already putting the incident with Ron out of his mind. "I must be going. Enjoy the article."

Ron watched him return to the Slytherin table warily. He hadn't realized how serious Harry's communications with his new friends were. Harry was working to recreate the Potter family to its former glory – working to become a Lord rather than an Heir. He hadn't realized until now but, now that he did, he felt a most crushing sorrow at how easily he had turned his friend away.

TBC...

AN2: I went to Anime North this past weekend. I loved it. Spent all my money so now I'm broke beyond belief but that's okay. My hair is purple now - several shades of purple. It is awesome.

YAY FOR RANDOM HUGS!

Lol

Chapter#30

Kirra watched her Warlord Prince keep his temper admirably in the face of the horrid female. Her Black thrummed softly at her throat and she pressed her fingers to it – seeking comfort from the deep, dark jewel. The bonds holding the Potter Lord were falling and she could feel the strain on the one between the two of them. The bond she had formed as a ‘Province’ Queen to Legacy’s position as his ‘Territory’ Queen. It was a tenuous position at best - especially when he only formed his bond with Legacy out of necessity and a brief friendship.

“When did you do this?” Umbridge snapped.

Harry blinked slowly at her. “Well, the thing is, I don't quite remember.” Hedwig hopped from the table onto her master's shoulder possessively. “I've been meeting with a fair number of people lately and the specific date for this article's interview seems to have slipped my mind.”

“Do not lie to me, Mr Potter,” Umbridge hissed.

His eyes narrowed in reply. “I don’t lie, madam,” he said.

“Detention!” she spat, spittle flying in her fury. Kirra’s lip curled in disgust.

“On what grounds?”

“Disrespecting the High Inquisitor! Spreading filthy lies!”

“Spreading lies is not grounds for handing out detentions, Professor,” Kirra interrupted, shooting the male a look. He blinked at her slowly and she reached out with the Black. His Sapphire hummed and accepted the leash she offered. A faint smile curved her lips and she walked over, setting herself between Harry and the horrid woman. She reached out to the Abyss and latched onto a little bit of its otherworldliness to infuse into her stare. It wasn’t as impressive or terrifying as when Witch looked out at you but it certainly gave her stare far more weight than any lander on Earth could handle.

“Kirra S.D.” The woman muttered the name darkly.

“Yes, madam?” Her tone of voice made it clear that the title was only just there for politeness.

“I should give you a detention for attempting to correct your betters.”

“You could try,” she returned with a smile and a nod of her head that said she wouldn’t get the first syllable out before Kirra reacted.

The two stared at each other – each used to being obeyed – but it wasn’t Kirra who looked away first. Umbridge adjusted her hat (disgustingly pink monstrosity that it was) and glanced at Harry intently before returning to meet Kirra’s unwavering stare. They engaged for a moment longer until Kirra smiled in a disturbingly predatory way and turned to the small group at the table. “Shall we head to class? I believe that Harry and Neville have History of Magic first; it’s on the way to the Defence room. I know that Luna and Ginny have class there.”

“We do,” Ginny agreed, standing and taking Harry’s arm – ignoring the High Inquisitor. “Come on.”

Kirra waited until she was sure Harry was out of the hall before speaking again. “I take it that the Minister wrote you about a visit my father may have made?” Umbridge’s eyes spat her hatred and Kirra felt a vindictive pleasure in holding her father’s power over another. She rarely needed to rely on him and very rarely enjoyed it when she did but this...thing was an exception. She didn’t think there was anything that could convince her that this woman didn’t deserve her father’s wrath – or her own. “Just remember, madam,” she said, “that my family does not take kindly to those who abuse their position.” She smiled in that predatory way that her mother had taught her and turned on heel – striding out of the hall in a blur of black robes.

Hermione read the Educational Decree Number Twenty-seven and sighed. It was an ingenious move on Harry’s part – to force Umbridge to ban the article. She was doing nothing more than guaranteeing everyone read his interview. It certainly didn’t help that Rita Skeeter

was using every persuasive technique in her repertoire to sound sincere and heartfelt to Harry's point of view.

When she'd first realized that Rita had written again, she had sent a letter to the woman - angrily chastising her for writing about Harry. She had received a reply telling her in scathing - if worded politely - terms that if she didn't want to use her blackmail maybe she shouldn't have let her dearest friend, Harry Potter, know about it and 'Oh, I meant ex-dearest friend.'

She had been shocked to read the defensive scolding the older woman sent her. It had a flavouring of Pureblood righteousness that she had dared to criticize. In an attempt to gain control of the situation, she had sent another letter asking why she would agree to help Harry so easily when he wouldn't have the guts to actually blackmail her (he was too shy, too nice to do such a thing).

Rita had replied that Lord Potter would do anything and everything to protect his family. If that meant blackmail, well... that was the least of Rita's concern. She told Hermione that if she was so desperate to have her friend back, that she should make herself useful and approach him with the benefits he was coming to expect from his allies. More like Blaise Zabini, Neville Longbottom, and Ginevra Weasley were doing.

"Ron?" The redhead looked up from the Prophet that he had been reading carefully ever since finishing Harry's interview.

"Yes?"

"What happened to Harry?"

"Nothing," Ron replied. "He's the same as he always was; you just don't want to see that."

Hermione felt herself frown. Harry was never as he was now; he had been quiet and painfully shy - a people pleaser. The Harry from her youth would never have thought of blackmail, let alone used it. He never would have abandoned them because it wasn't good politics to

continue to be friends with them. No, Harry was definitely a changed man.

“Hermione,” Ron began almost hesitantly, “have I ever told you about the old families?”

“You’ve said that they’re all Pureblood elitists.”

“Have I ever fully explained them?”

“What else is there to explain?”

Ron’s eyes were guarded and prompted her to question her resolve. She sat down beside him on the couch and he stared at his hands for a long time. She waited, understanding that whatever he had to say was something important enough that he didn’t want to mess up the wording of his thoughts.

“The old families protected us,” he said at last. It sounded as though it pained him to admit something so kindly. “Before the founders - before the schools were put in place - things were hectic, to say the least. Magic folk hid themselves in the muggle population for fear of persecution - the Inquisition, the Crusades - but we were few and far between back then. Hell, we didn’t even have a ‘Wizarding World’ like we do today.”

“The old families were witches and wizards who also happened to be the heirs of powerful families; lords, counts, dukes...the sort of people who ruled everyone else. The ones who could safely build a city and armies to defend them with. They had the ability to demand that anyone charged with witchcraft be brought before them personally for judgement.”

“No lords ever did that,” Hermione scoffed. Muggle schooling cared more for history than wizarding kind did. It seemed that wizards only cared if it had to do with Pureblood breeding or the advances in their isolated little world.

“Well the old families didn’t exactly advertise it, did they?” Ron snapped back, startling Hermione with the vehemence in his voice.

“They were heirs to the families so their parents indulged their interests secretly and let them build prisons to play with the heathens and heretics - witches and wizards.”

“Of course, they didn’t actually torture any of the ‘prisoners’ like their parents expected. Instead, they taught them everything they knew about magic so that they could protect themselves and then they helped them start new lives elsewhere under new identities. Over the years, the old families managed to steadily produce at least a single magical child per generation and they passed on the secret of their protection to each child. It was inevitable that the children would meet each other - what with shifting powers and countries - and one day they managed to get every witch and wizard who was head of a family together to form a...” here Ron’s eyes glazed over as he struggled to word the term he wanted, “...well, they called it Le Conseil de la Protection pour le Pur. French was the language of nobility, at the time. Basically, it translates to - ”

“The Counsel of the Protection for the Pure.” Hermione bristled. “Pureblooded bigots even back then?”

“No!” Ron’s voice was sharp and reprimanding. “Pure had a different meaning to them. Hermione, you have to understand, back then our magic didn’t come from ourselves - we channelled it from everything around us. It was a very spiritual and nature-oriented thing and the Pure referred to magic users being able to feel the pure energy that filled the earth and use it. That their families happened to steadily produce magic users was just a lucky coincidence.”

“The old families founded the Wizarding World as we know it. They protected us when everyone wanted us dead and, as far as the Purebloods they’ve turned into today are concerned, they’re still protecting us.”

“From the horrible mudbloods.” She spat the term.

“From the considerable threat of what would happen if our world was exposed,” he corrected calmly. “Hermione, muggles would think magic can produce miracles but there’s only so much it can do. It can’t cure cancer any more than it can cure the common cold but it

can mend a broken bone in a second or heal third degree burns without so much as a scar. To them, that's as close to a miracle as they'll ever see and they'd always expect more and be angry when we can't provide it."

Hermione blinked. She couldn't deny it; Ron was right. She could see why Purebloods were so prejudiced against muggles and she could understand the fear once she heard the history but, still... "Isn't that a little old-fashioned?"

"I never said they were progressive," Ron smiled. "I think that's why Harry's working so hard to build up the Potter family's power again. He wants to regain their power as one of the Counsel to protect us but bring us up to the present as well. He wants us out of the dark ages but he doesn't want our existence threatened; it's a difficult position to take, let alone hold."

She was silent for a long time. Long enough that Ron was starting to look worried. She tried to smile reassuringly but felt herself frown in concentration almost immediately. He had given her a lot to think about and it was exceedingly difficult to coincide the old definition of pureblood with the families she knew of today. She rubbed a finger along the soft gleam of her White jewel for comfort but it didn't help. Her mind flashed involuntarily to Lucien - to his kind letters and fierce protectiveness that flavoured his words. She got up abruptly, itching to go and write a letter. He would help her organize her thoughts; he would understand her confusion. "I have to go."

Ron nodded silently. "You have homework." It wasn't a question. She smiled at him, thankful for the excuse.

"I do. See you later?"

"Later," he agreed.

"Are you alright?"

She felt the concern leaking in through the barrier between his mind and hers. She felt him wrap around her curiously as if he could discern the reason by the feel of her emotions. She reached out in

response, gently urging him behind the shield where he was safer and where his own emotions didn't press so insistently against her own.

"I'm fine."

"Well, you certainly don't seem fine."

"It's nothing," she growled.

"Which means, naturally, that it's something," he responded reasonably. He gave her the equivalent of a nudge. "Tell me. I was a prefect; I dealt with a fair share of upset girls in my lifetime."

"Yeah, firsties," she scoffed but she was smiling outwardly. Tom wasn't as horrible a presence any longer. In fact, she turned to him for comfort whenever Harry wasn't available and even considered telling the green-eyed Warlord Prince about the other resident in her mind. She had finally worked up the courage when he had gone into the rut and she hadn't been able to work it up again since. The very idea of Harry experiencing something as masculine and possessive as the rut reminded her that perhaps her best friend wouldn't appreciate the idea of another male living inside her head.

"Ah, the young warlord, eh?" Tom's voice was teasing and she scowled mentally at him. "He is out for bigger things than us."

"I know," she sighed. She knew Harry loved her dearly - she was his closest friend - but she had no delusions that he would ever love her as more until he was finished arranging his Lordship to its best advantage. He was on the right track now but he still had a long way to go and a lot to learn.

"Cheer up." Tom sounded uncomfortable and his presence twined through her mind uneasily. She became suspicious and prodded him irritably. He responded almost immediately, sounding very nervous and highly apologetic. "Ginny, love, it's rather unnerving in here whenever you get upset. I'm not saying that every emotion you feel affects the inner workings of your mind but...you are very emotional and it does affect my 'living' space."

She winced slightly, feeling the sting of reproach. She genuinely liked Tom and enjoyed his sarcastic yet charming wit. To realize that her mental shields were so abysmal that he was becoming uncomfortable behind his own rather formidable shields was upsetting.

“Ginny?” She jumped at the sound of a physical voice and whirled to face concerned emerald eyes. Harry was frowning at her, hands folded behind his back and bent slightly to meet her gaze. She watched his Sapphire glint as it fell out and swung on its chain and blinked up at him silently. “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay,” she murmured, hoping to soothe his worry.

His frown only deepened. “Don’t lie.”

“I am!”

“I don’t believe you.” His eyes glimmered in annoyance. She huffed at him as Tom laughed at her in her mind. Harry’s expression lightened - his Blood instincts calming at the female denying his right to serve out of indignation rather than because she didn’t want him to help. He still reached out and touched her shoulder, nudging her into speaking.

“It’s nothing you can help with,” she corrected herself. He snorted as if disbelieving he couldn’t help her. She scowled at him and shoved at Tom when he refused to stifle his snickers.

“Try me,” he drawled. His eyes implored her to let him help.

She hesitated. “Swear you won’t freak out?”

“I promise.”

“Swear.”

He shifted, searching her face for answers as if they were written there. He straightened finally, smoothing his robes and inclining his head. “I swear. You have my word.”

“Do you know how to build up shields in another person’s mind?”

“Yes.” He was tenser now, intent on her every word. “Why?”

“It might be best if you look for yourself,” she mumbled and braced herself for him to take her invitation.

His probe against her mind was soft and cool, skittering over the outer walls and doing a preliminary exploration. She relaxed at the gentility and reached out as best she could, trying to bring him beyond the first line of defence.

/ Give me a moment, / he said. She was startled at the similarities to Tom’s ‘voice’ but quelled under the stern tone. / I could very well harm your mind if I descend too quickly. /

She relented and waited for him to finish. A Sapphire light flared in her mind as he entered and she instinctively lashed out. He halted and she felt soothing emotions blanketing her own. / Easy now, I’m not doing anything if you’re upset like this. /

“How very kind of you,” Tom sounded genuinely pleased and she could feel Harry tense mentally and physically at the second male voice behind her shields. His lips pulled back in a silent snarl as his jewel flared violently. She launched herself at Tom, wrapping around him protectively and hissing outwardly.

“Leave him!” she snapped. Harry’s mind was coiled like a serpent, twisting and twining over itself in agitation - unwilling to suffer another male so close to one of ‘his’ females’ inner barriers and under the instinctive urge to obey her command. “He’s the reason I need your help; we need a better barrier between us and around my mind.”

/ He’s not dangerous? Doesn’t mean any harm? / He was suspicious and even his psychic voice was simmering with temper.

“No,” she reassured him quickly. His mind was becoming heavy and hot as it cradled hers carefully but it was a tad overwhelming to feel the seemingly careless use of such a massive amount of power around her core. He must have felt her discomfort for he withdrew

quickly, sending a feeling of regret and the cool soothing emotions he had used when first entering. Outwardly, he had grabbed her arms and now carefully supported her against his chest, running his fingers up and down her arms in slow repetitive motions that calmed him just as much as it did her.

/ You swear you mean no harm to her? / He directed his question to Tom and she warily let him out to speak.

“I swear it, by my magic and all that I am,” Tom replied firmly. His presence was a defensive bristling thing and Harry seemed to survey him with amusement hidden behind a wall of intimidation. “I would protect her even if it meant my own destruction.”

/ Good. / Ginny was preview to Harry’s inner core twining like a contented cat and she could have sworn she felt a purr rumbling in his physical chest, pressed as she was against it. / I will help you. However, I will need time to prepare. Give me a day or two. /

“Deal.”

Ginny huffed faintly. “Are you even going to consult me?”

“No.”

/ You can hardly be counted on to not do something silly and get yourself hurt, / Harry agreed. / You’re female. / But he said the word with such heartfelt, possessive, fond emotion that she couldn’t help but flush in embarrassment as he smiled smugly at her, eyes flashing in amusement.

Harry was busily writing letters to his growing list of contacts. He was thanking them all for their support in his decision to give an interview and telling them little tidbits that he hadn’t mentioned. They each got something different but he knew they would all cross-reference with each other and that they enjoyed the political manoeuvring they could do with their little pieces of information.

“Harry?” The voice was not one he had heard in a long time and so it took him a moment to clue into the fact that Seamus was speaking

with him. He looked up from a letter to Lady Chang that he planned to include with his acceptance to Su's eventual wedding to Felix Vaisey. "Can I talk to you?"

"Finnigan." He inclined his head fractionally, ignoring his roommate's wince at the formality. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to apologize," he muttered and Harry realized he must have been putting the other off. He softened his gaze and waited patiently (though, truth be told, he rather preferred to be ignored to being called a liar) for him to finish. "You know, for not believing you. I've sent a copy of the article to me mam and I think she'll believe you too."

"Thank you," Harry said. He was slightly surprised to realize that he meant it and his eyes softened even more as a smile tugged at his lips. He glanced at his letters, knowing he needed to finish them even if he now wanted more to spend time with a friend he'd unwillingly neglected.

"What is all this?" Seamus, it seemed, was willing to bridge the gap between them with his usual curiosity as he leaned over to peer at the unrolled letter. "Lady Chang? You writing to Cho's parents?"

"Her mother, yes." Harry smiled, putting the letter away. "Her little sister is in Slytherin - you know, Su? She's getting married this summer. I'm just going over the details so I can make it to the wedding."

"Isn't she like...twelve?"

"Eleven, actually." Harry laughed a little at the expression on his friend's face. "It's an arranged marriage but one that she entered into willingly. Her fiancé loves her to pieces - I've seen him willingly sit with her while she does research for hours on end, saying nothing. The worst part is, he's happy to do it." He shook his head in mock disgust and Seamus laughed. "She's absolutely thrilled and I want to support her."

Seamus smiled crookedly and plopped down onto the couch beside Harry. "So that's what you've been so busy with the whole time?"

"No," Harry said. "A single wedding couldn't keep me this busy. No, I've been trying to find out the extent of the Potter family's influence."

"Oh, right!" Seamus blinked as realization dawned. "Your dad was a Pureblood, wasn't he? And the Potters are an old family?"

"One of the oldest," Harry agreed. He gave his friend a slightly bitter smile. "It's difficult, you know, trying to learn about a family everyone assumes you already know about?"

The Irish male's expression turned stunned and he suddenly frowned. "You mean no one's ever sat down and talked to you about them?"

"Why would they? I'm Harry Potter - a celebrity, the Boy-Who-Lived - of course I already know about my parents who died when I was a year old." He glanced up and saw that Seamus was frowning disapprovingly at him and realized what he must sound like. He sighed and spoke again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come across so angry it's just...frustrating."

"I don't know what you feel like but I can imagine," he said. He looked away awkwardly. "Look, I know we aren't exactly close or anything but I am your friend and I'll be here if you ever want to talk or just...hang out or something."

Harry eyed his dormmate carefully. Seamus was right; they hadn't ever been close but they were friends and they'd shared a room for the past five years. He hadn't had any really close friends since awakening his Warlord Prince and he'd honestly missed being able to spend time with male friends without feeling like he had to reign in his instincts (since his only male friends currently were also friends with his female friends). Seamus was close enough that Harry felt sure he could relax but distant enough that he would rather ignore it if Harry began acting oddly. "Thanks," he murmured sincerely, watching the other flush and look away.

“Don’t make a big deal of it or anything,” he mumbled. “It’s the least I can do after what I’ve helped put you through.”

“You mean besides endless nights of Ron’s snoring because you wouldn’t put a silencer on my bed when it was your turn to cast the charm?” They’d learned back in first year that taking turns throughout the night to cast silencing charms on Ron was the only way to get a decent night’s sleep. Although, through the years, Ron had begun to build an immunity to the charm and they’d started casting it on each person’s bed instead. Seamus had been conveniently ‘forgetting’ to cast it on Harry’s bed whenever it was his turn in the unofficial rotation to cast the spell.

The flush of awkwardness burned into one of embarrassment and Seamus huffed. “That was because you didn’t tell us when you brought that beast of a snake into the room.”

Harry blinked and froze. They’d noticed Paladine? “What do you mean?”

Seamus snorted indignantly. “Ron may be an idiot but the rest of us noticed almost right away. We don’t care if you can speak with snakes or even if you get one as a pet but you could at least let us know. We aren’t stupid.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to flush. “Right. Sorry. I’ll properly introduce you to her tonight, then. Oh, and she’s not just a pet - she’s my familiar too.”

“I thought Hedwig was your familiar?”

“She is. However, Paladine - that’s her name - is too. She’s also a Coatl, not just a snake.”

Seamus stared blankly. “A what?”

“She’s a snake with wings,” Harry drawled in amusement.

“Oh. Well, why didn’t you just say so?”

TBC...

Chapter#31

“...and so the Dark Lord offers your Master a very prodigious proposal for an alliance between them.”

“I have heard your proposal,” the pale-faced figure drawled and crimson eyes flashed in the dimly lit room. “And I can tell you with perfect confidence that Ravus will reject your Master’s proposal without even seeing you.”

“How dare you! You would defy the Dark Lord when all of your kind allies with him?”

“By ‘all of my kind’ I assume you mean those weaklings that fall into a rage at the merest hint of blood.” The male leaned forward, peering at the white-masked male before him. His lips had curled back as he spoke in a fanged facsimile of a smile.

“You know very well that the Vampire Lord has pledged his allegiance to my Master,” the Death Eater snapped irritably. Crimson eyes flared with temper but the vampire remained silent as he observed the male throw a small fit of temper.

“You are clearly misinformed.’ The voice that spoke was a new one and eerily void of emotion. “There is no such thing as a single Vampire Lord. Your Dark Lord is allied with one of the Lords - a pathetic, recent addition to the title.” Cold jade eyes flared as a figure in a long dark coat entered the room from a door mostly in shadows. He cut an intimidating figure - well muscled and tall with a heavy metal gauntlet covering one arm. Dark hair fell around his face in a lazy mess and cast deep shadows into the planes of his face.

“Ravus!” The vampire’s false smile turned into a full-blown, feral grin. “Why on earth are you visiting my little shop?”

“I wanted to deliver your pay from the last job.” The cold eyes cut to the side and observed the vampire blankly. “Silas, why are you entertaining Death Eaters?”

"They are under the impression that I am your keeper," he replied promptly. The vampire, Silas, examined his nails absently. "I don't know what gave them that idea."

"Hn." Ravus dropped an official looking roll of black parchment marked with silver ink onto the table. Silas's eyes followed it intently even if he didn't move an inch. "Bank note. The goblins don't give out large sums like that in cash." He glanced at the Death Eater who had started trembling beneath his dark robes the minute Silas had announced the identity of their guest.

"My Lord Ravus," the man sputtered, overwhelmed at the intensity of being under the notorious assassin's stare. He was only a young man - wiry and pale beneath the over-large robes. His eyes were brown and frightened behind his mask. "The Dark Lord..."

"Is none of my concern," Ravus drawled. His eyes flashed with something like amused annoyance before they faded to their usual stony blankness. "I do not care for his ideals nor the ideals of his enemies. I simply complete the jobs that catch my attention regardless of who they are for and will continue to do so until such a time comes that my attention is captured indefinitely."

"But Ravus...!"

"I am finished here." Ravus turned, ignoring the other as if he weren't there. "Silas, please ensure that the invitation to Lady Chang's wedding of her daughter is sent ahead to Tibet instead of Sydney. It seems that our errant target has moved in an attempt to evade capture. He seems to think that the monks can be persuaded to protect him."

"You mean the monks who offered to give you one of their beloved temple dogs?"

"The very same," he replied. Ravus seemed amused again but one movement from the Death Eater and he went stony once more. "Good day, Silas. See to it that I receive that invitation."

"Naturally," Silas replied. He cast a look at the Death Eater who was gaping at them. "You'll send Jadwiga?"

"She'll be the only one able to find me."

"The Death Eater?" Silas tilted his head.

"Hn." The young servant's eyes widened as Ravus turned with a perfectly dead expression. Green light began to cackle around his gauntlet and it illuminated his eyes. The Death Eater paled and began to stammer apologies.

"P - please, you c-can't! I don't want to die!"

"I'm sorry," Ravus murmured, reaching out and cupping his face in a gentle hand. The Death Eater whimpered as his mask was removed, revealing the youthful features and the tears slowly working their way down his cheeks. The gauntlet cackled malevolently. "But it's easier this way, trust me..."

Luna was having a rare moment of lucidity. She could look at her collection of dream catchers without seeing the connections and the symbols. She could walk down the hall without seeing visions of possibilities around every corner. She smiled to herself, padding barefoot down the corridor. It was nice, every once in awhile, to be normal. Sharp blue eyes flickered around the hall - following the progress of her familiar as he bounced slowly around, squeaking each time he struck the floor. Henry was thrilled with her concentration and wanted to celebrate.

"Sir Henry?" She blinked at the interruption of her thoughts. Down the hall, Henry had reached a corner and was squeaking indignantly at someone in his way. Her eyes trailed over the red hair, closer to auburn, really, and the golden eyes. "What are you doing all the way down here? Luna must be worried sick."

"Hello, George," she greeted softly. She waited for him to turn and notice her and then offered him a faint smile. Henry squeaked loudly, settling at the sound of her voice, and she felt the brush of him against her mind - conveying his greetings wordlessly. "Henry says

hello as well.” There was another apologetic brush and she grinned a little in amusement. “He also says he’s sorry for being angry with you for a moment; he thought you were Fred.”

“That’s okay.” George grinned at her and carefully picked up Henry, cradling the puffskein as he approached her. “So, what are you doing all the way down here?”

“Celebrating lucidity; Henry insisted.”

“Sounds like fun.” His grin was infectious and she fought not to smile like the lunatic she usually was. “Care for some company?”

Henry was silent and his bond to her thrummed indifferently. She frowned, suddenly nervous, and averted her eyes. She shifted and twined her fingers together, unsure. Henry usually was the voice of reason and told her what he thought she should do and she - knowing that she lacked the capacity to decide safely on her own - felt out of her element without his input. Still, the fact that he wasn’t voicing any opinion of George Weasley meant that he trusted her opinion of him.

She squared her shoulders and looked up, surprised to see that he was still standing patiently and waiting for her with the same friendly, welcoming smile. She grinned in reply and his smile widened as his eyes sparkled brightly. “If you want to?” she offered with just a touch of question.

“Of course I want to,” he said. Then, playfully, “Who wouldn’t want to spend time with a pretty girl?”

“I can name a few.”

He grinned at her, obviously pleased with her response. She smiled in reply. She had always thought that George hated the girls who twittered at his lame little flirting teases. It appeared that she was correct, if the amusement glimmering back at her was any indication. “Have you ever been to the Shrieking Shack?”

“Yes.”

“Ever been inside?”

“...no.” She had to admit, she was curious. There was a fence surrounding the famous Shack to keep out visitors (not that anyone really wanted to go in) but Luna had always been curious about the old place with the air of having once being majestic and elegant.

“Do you want to?” his grin was mischievous and encouraging and she was startled to realize that she was still lucid and she really wanted to go with him. He must have seen acceptance in her expression for he reached out and grabbed her hand, tugging eagerly. “Come on, I want to show you a something you’ll probably never see otherwise.”

“Alright,” she agreed. His hand tightened on hers and she watched him carefully tuck Henry into a pocket inside his outer robes. Henry squeaked delightedly and she felt him send reassurance along their bond. The reassurance seemed deeper than usual and she figured he wanted her to know that her lucidity would last a good deal longer than it usually did (most likely because of all her recent work while wandering possibilities). She smiled and padded barefoot along the stone floors after a laughing George.

With the increase in speed, the sound of her bare feet slapping against the floor seemed unusually loud. George glanced down as he led her along and frowned, abruptly stopping.

In fact, the stop was so abrupt that she nearly tripped and it was only his quick grip on her hips that stopped her from falling. She stared down at him curiously, forcing herself to ignore how good it felt to have a male holding her carefully - warm hands heating her skin through her robes and corded muscle flexing under her palms as he held her above the ground. “Why aren’t you wearing shoes?” he asked but his tone was slightly upset.

“I couldn’t find them.” She suspected her fellow Ravenclaws were annoyed at her for her increase in dream catchers and this was their way of showing it. She’d get them back at the end of the year but for now, she was barefoot.

“Hm,” he hummed thoughtfully and hauled her up against him with one arm so he could rummage through his pockets with his free arm. She felt herself blushing and forced it back, remaining still as though she wasn’t affected. He looked up triumphantly and brandished his wand. “Got it!”

“And what are you planning on doing with that?” She breathed an inward sigh of relief as he set her down. Henry squeaked his amusement and she felt an overwhelming urge to pinch her familiar.

“I’m pretty handy at conjuration,” he admitted. “It doesn’t feel right to let a lady go without shoes and mine are way too big for you.”

She smirked. “You know what they say about feet, don’t you?” George laughed and quickly conjured a plain pair of shoes for her. She slipped them on and grinned as his chuckles subsided. “So how do you plan on getting us to the Shrieking Shack?”

“You know the Whomping Willow?”

Her mind flashed with all the possible ways to calm the tree. Her lucidity faltered for one brief moment until she acknowledged the correct way. “You mean the tunnel beneath it?” She flashed a small smirk at the way he gaped disbelievingly at her. “You just have to hit the knot in the trunk, right?”

“You know, Luna,” George began, shaking his head and fighting a smile, “sometimes I wonder just how ‘loony’ you really are.”

Silas had long ago forgotten his last name. It came with the territory of being old enough to be Nicolas Flamel’s grandfather several times over. He’d seen the rise and fall of empires, kings, queens, and countries; one would think he’d had time to understand human nature.

Apparently, Ravus wasn’t human.

The vampire sighed as he watched Ravus subtly hit a pressure point on the young man’s neck, letting the superficial green-tinted magic vanish. The dark-haired human grunted as he took the weight of the Death Eater, carefully lifted him, and laid him out on a lounge along

the side of Silas' office. The immortal waited for his client to turn before he spoke.

"I thought you were going to kill him."

"You thought wrong." Ravus crushed the white mask beneath his boot and stared at the cracked mask blankly. "He's just a kid."

"He's older than you."

"You don't know that," Ravus said. He looked up and cast his eyes around the room. "I'll take him with me to Tibet. The monks will be delighted to help heal him from any residual Black magic and I can escape before they try to hand me one of their ridiculous temple beasts."

Silas felt his inner accountant stir and begin to growl at him. "Do you know how much some people would pay for a temple dog the monks aren't going to go searching for?"

"Probably the same amount of money it would take to buy a mountain," Ravus' voice was amused. His eyes flashed as he crossed his arms. "But I like the monks. I'm not taking one of their dogs just to sell it."

"You are impossible. How you manage to afford the life you do, I'll never know."

"It might have something to do with the entire family I just slaughtered so that my clients could claim a paltry inheritance. Or any number of the other horrific crimes I've committed because you thought it would interest me."

"And those jobs didn't?" Silas sneered. He watched Ravus carefully and saw the mortal's lips twitch. He grinned and finally reached out to grab the bank note, unfurling it and reading the numbers listed. His eyebrows shot to his hairline. "This was all for a 'paltry' inheritance?"

"Paltry in the sense that they aren't exactly going to melt down the solid gold grand staircase just to sell it." Ravus smirked. "I can't

complain; it was certainly easier just to poison the lot then it is to track down this recent target in the wilds of Tibet.”

“Did you need any supplies, by the way?” Silas slipped the bank note into a pocket and sized up his most profitable client (he was Ravus’ accountant, supplier, realtor, and secretary all at once). Ravus looked ridiculously relaxed despite his recent slaughter and the vampire silently admired the apathy the assassin had perfected despite his rather young age.

“I think I want to fly.”

“Plane?” Silas didn’t bat an eyelash at the request. Ravus was indiscriminate when it came to muggle and magical. “Broom? I can get you a carpet if you want one.”

“Plane. Do I still have a private jet?”

Silas plucked a BlackBerry from within an inner pocket. It had been modified to run off ambient magic while still functioning in the muggle world. He pulled up the special section he had for Ravus and surveyed the folder he’d designated for any and all vehicles the assassin owned. “You do,” he confirmed. “The silver or the white?”

“Surprise me.”

“When do you want to leave?”

“Tomorrow morning. I’ve put a sleeping potion in his bloodstream. He won’t be up for at least another day.” Ravus blinked and his eyes glazed over. “Be sure that we stop by Paris on the way. Jadwiga is currently entertaining Nymph at the villa and I don’t fancy leaving those two together any longer than necessary.”

Silas recognized the look as the other checking in on his familiar. “Nymph?”

“Old acquaintance.”

"I see." He waited to see if there was anything else forthcoming. "Anything else?"

"That will be all," Ravus concluded. He offered the faintest of smiles before the stony look came back. "I'll swing by after I pick up my pay. Don't forget about that invitation." He went over and picked up the Death Eater, cradling the young male as if he actually cared (which, knowing Ravus' fondness for unpredictability, wouldn't surprise him). The assassin flickered for a moment and vanished without a sound.

Severus Snape wasn't a Master of Occlumency and Legilimency for nothing. He had told Harry Potter that his shields were adequate to prevent unwanted visions from the Dark Lord during his sleep but wouldn't stand up if they came face-to-face. He had helped the young male improve his shields but he still relied heavily on the natural protections that came from wearing the Sapphire and being one of the mysterious Blood. Severus had therefore decided to remind the boy that he needed to improve his wizarding protections as well.

Harry blinked at him from across the desk. Severus tilted his head and raised his wand. "Legilimens," he murmured. He locked his gaze with the boy and felt it when his psyche slipped into the boy's mind.

Inside his mind, Severus was confronted with the usual glimmering Sapphire light that penetrated the darkness and protected the boy's mind. He ignored the wall and slipped into a deeper level of Legilimency, entering a purely wizard area that Harry was probably unaware was even there.

He smirked outwardly as he caught the image of widening eyes. The Potter boy frowned and his eyes glazed over as he dove into his mind to try to find where Snape had disappeared. It would take him a minute and so Severus took the time to take in Potter's mindscape.

It had taken the form of the Forbidden Forest, or, at least, the outskirts. He tilted his head and peered around the edge of the forest, smirking knowingly as he spotted a more heavily fortified Hogwarts. Harry was rather unique in that his wizarding magic had merged with his Blood magic. He could use both or one at a time and it hadn't been until recently that Severus had figured that the boy hadn't paid

proper attention to the wizarding portion of his mind. That, although it benefited from his work on the Blood shields, it wasn't up to an acceptable level.

The forest was a metaphysical representation of the teen's memories, emotions, instincts, will, and magic. It was also an indication of his personality - something that slightly unnerved Severus. He felt the shift in the Forest and glanced up, watching the previously stormy sky brighten and the trees around him rustle in a soft breeze. The owner of this mind had found his mindscape and it was reacting to his presence there.

Harry emerged from the Forest, stepping onto the grassy knoll Severus had found himself on, and startling the Professor. He blinked in surprise, frowning as his student joined him silently - peering around curiously.

"Your Inner Mind is in the Forbidden Forest?"

"Is that where I came in?" Emerald eyes turned slowly from examining the oddly protected Hogwarts. At Severus' nod, he shrugged. "Then yes, it is. Is that odd?"

"I would have thought you associated Hogwarts with protection, not the Forbidden Forest."

"The Forest is the most protected place I can think of," Harry admitted, seeming almost reluctant to do so. "I've been attacked too many times at Hogwarts to feel safe but every time I've been here," he gestured to the Forest behind them, "it's fought to keep me out...and succeeded."

Severus conceded the point with a tilt of his head. "You read the books on Occlumency in the Slytherins' private library?"

"I read the books in Slytherin's private library," Harry said. He stared at Snape for a long moment until the man's eyes widened.

"You found Salazar Slytherin's private library?"

"Same entrance," Harry smirked, "but you need to speak the language, so to speak."

"So you understand where we are?"

"Some," Harry seemed hesitant now and the sky darkened. "I may have been neglecting to attend to this area, simply because it's very hard to get here on my own."

"We are in your inner mindscape. This is what any Legilimens will see upon entering your mind...after they realize that your other shields are keeping them from descending to the depth in your mind they need to be in order to accomplish anything. Of course, if they are incompetent, then they may assume that your shields are your mindscape. Of course, this is false, but idiots are idiots."

"So how do I protect this portion?" Harry looked around with a frown. "I can't access my Sapphire from in here to build up those shields."

"That is why I am here," Severus sneered. He motioned to the castle. "You may have changed but there are few who recognize it. In the interest of your safety the first line of defence will be deception; we will make it appear as if Hogwarts is your Inner Mind and the Forest just an ineffectual aspect of your mindscape."

"How do we do that?"

"You will use Hogwarts as the centre of your emotional control. The high concentration of emotions will feel like memories and, if you put up enough traps and defensive pieces around it, will be a highly convincing Inner Mind." Snape knew that the boy had followed his logic but was still confused. Most likely because he could clearly feel the difference between his emotions and his memories while Severus could only tell the difference because the boy had told him which was which. "My mind is like smoke," he explained patiently. "Sometimes it is there and sometimes it isn't. As it is ever changing, it is naturally suited to hiding my Inner Mind from any intrusion. Yours is structured, very much so, but your Inner Mind is hidden beyond something vast and wild. Once an intruder realizes that there are no memories within Hogwarts they will turn to the next thing..."

“The Forbidden Forest.” Harry turned to face the dark place and frowned. “So in order to protect myself I have to make everything as real and dangerous as possible.”

“Correct.” Severus would have said something else but didn’t feel like delving into the details when the Potter heir had figured out a way on his own. He protected his smoke-like mind by making sure that it was constantly shifting shades and shapes, fading in and out. The best way to protect Potter’s mind was to get him to find one thing to represent everything but that was the final stage of Occlumency and the boy needed a quick-fix more than he needed to complete the apprenticeship necessary to reach that level. His plan to fortify his mind was a difficult one but one that was more reasonably accomplished. If the boy were smart, he would realize that it was easier to control one large thing rather than many smaller aspects contained in a base. He could safely begin to progress to his Master stage at that point but Severus doubted he would get to that point for a fair while.

“Thank you, sir,” he heard the soft murmur and looked over. Harry was standing by what appeared to be a young Thestral. The little foal bared fangs at him and flapped its wings. Severus smirked. For a first attempt at protection, it wasn’t terrible. He supposed it would grow as Harry worked on his mind. “You’ll help me find my way here on my own?”

“I am your teacher, Mr Potter,” Snape drawled. “Now, let’s take a look at how detailed your ‘Hogwarts’ really is...”

Lady Zabini smiled over her cup of tea at Lady Chang. The two had gotten together at the Chang estate in Winchester. Lord Chang was busy arranging invitations to the wedding with Lord Vaisey. Lady Vaisey was too busy inspecting each and every property they owned for a proper getaway house as a gift for the bride to join them.

“Have you heard from Lord Potter recently?”

Lady Chang smiled, sipping from her cup with almost preternatural grace. “I have. Such a sweet boy, don’t you think?”

"Absolutely adorable," Lady Zabini agreed immediately. "You did send him an invitation, didn't you? I absolutely must meet with him in person."

"Oh, naturally!" Lady Chang seemed almost horrified at the suggestion that she wouldn't. She placed her cup down and peered across the table separating them. "Shaylee, you aren't going to bring your current husband, are you?"

"That idiot? Honestly, Lien, what do you take me for?" Shaylee Zabini scoffed. "No, I'm planning on sending a letter to Ravus to deal with that one."

"Is he still in the country?" Lien Chang asked curiously, eyes lighting up. Ravus had made an impression on both Ladies when they had been younger and Ravus wasn't as notorious as he was now. He was charmingly apathetic and devoutly polite. "I'd heard that he was visiting with someone in Italy."

"If he were in Italy, I would have known about it." Shaylee smirked. "No, he was in Australia, last I had heard - chasing after some errant heir to a minor family there. However," her smirk curled in a pleased grin, "I did manage to weasel out of dearest Silas that the boy is in the country for the next day or so - apparently that Australian heir is trying to hide in Tibet."

"Oh dear," Lien smirked. "I supposed he doesn't know about the monks and our assassin."

"Evidently. Silas wanted you to know to send the invitation to him and he will send it along to Tibet."

"I will." Lien nodded. "Now, about Harry, has he asked you about a portkey to get him to and from the ministry?"

"For Apparition lessons? He had mentioned it in passing but hasn't asked outright yet."

"A similar situation for me. Do you think he expects anything from us with his mentioning?"

Shaylee was quiet for a moment, her beautiful features troubled. She eventually shook her head and spoke. "I don't believe so. I think he has grown comfortable with us and said it merely in friendship - keeping us up-to-date in his life despite our distance. He is a very genuine boy, in his letters to me."

"And to me," Lien agreed. "I have read his letters to my husband and he is far more formal there. Su tells me that he tries to be sly with her but he is far too gentle and careful with her to be any good at it. My eldest tells me that he is even kind to those who have wronged him."

"My son tells me that he is far harsher with males - have you heard of the way he fell out with the youngest Weasley boy?"

"Su was in the library at the very time it happened. She said he was almost frigid with him. Highly out of character."

"The poor dear," Shaylee murmured, looking out at the view of the grounds from the pavilion they had chosen to have their tea in. "Trying so hard to find his place and giving up his friends needlessly. They would have come around but he hardly gave them a chance..."

"He is young; it is natural for him to make mistakes." Lien shook her head sadly. "Although I wish he would not have to. He has been through too much already."

"Shall we get him that portkey?"

"I've already arranged to meet with one of 'my' officials," Lien smirked slyly at her friend. "I assumed you wouldn't mind convincing him to put in the paperwork after Lord Potter had finished using it."

"You know me too well, Lady Chang."

TBC...

AN2: Not that anyone cares, but I figure it might help some people to know. I was planning on taking a fifth year in high school but I've recently made the decision to work for a year instead (mostly because they screwed up my schedule so royally it wasn't even worth the time) and am looking for a full-time job. So yeah...just so you know. I'm still only part-time now but come September I plan to get my resume out there and get into full-time so I have no idea how fast this story will progress once I get a taste of real life.

Once again, please review!

OH! And woot woot, Canada has 13 medals at the Olympics! (last I checked)

Chapter#32

Blaise looked up from his breakfast at the sound of wings. The morning mail came through the upper rafters of the great hall in a mass of feathers and soft hoots from the various owls. When delivering mail, owls were usually vocal in a soft way that they wouldn't be when at their leisure. The Slytherin supposed this was a good thing since it made identifying his Penny a whole lot easier.

The pretty little hawk screeched as she entered, diving towards the table and sweeping up the length dramatically before coming to land in front of him in a rather undignified tumble. Blaise felt his lips pull back into a smile and quickly regained his composure when Penny made a brief unhappy noise.

"Good morning, pretty Penny," he murmured as he reached out to sooth the little hawk. Penny was rather small for her breed since she had been the chick shoved out of her nest. It was only his mother, Shaylee Zabini's, quick thinking (and weeks of constant surveillance) that had saved the little female chick from being killed. "What have you got for me?"

She chirruped merrily and stuck out her foot proudly. He didn't resist the grin this time and untied it, offering her a bit of bacon he quickly stole from his neighbour's plate. Opening his letter, he began to read only to freeze at the sight of the silver ink. He felt himself pale and scrambled to get the letter out of sight, knocking over his goblet of water in the process.

Penny made the beginning of a shriek at the sudden tension in her master and hopped up to his shoulder, preening anxiously. "Go on up to the owlery, Penny," he urged. She sulked a little but did as he ordered, taking flight with only a brief tightening of her talons on his shoulder.

"What have you got there, Zabini?" He looked up at the sound of Felix Vaisey's voice. The Slytherin Chaser grinned and tried to catch a glimpse of the letter, even if it was by now safely within Blaise's bag.

Blaise heaved an inward sigh and fixed the other male with a blank look. "Well, considering it came with the morning mail..."

"No need to be snippy," Felix huffed. Still, his lips twitched in amusement. Then he spoke in a softer tone, "Look, you're friends with Potter and Su's friends with Potter and I don't want her upset cause Potter is upset over you. Get what I'm saying?"

"I would not get upset," Su snarled at her fiancé. The other turned with a wide grin and the beginnings of proclamations of how much he loved her on his lips. She fixed an icy look on him and he wailed theatrically, draping himself around her waist where she stood just behind him. The other Slytherins turned away, embarrassed that Vaisey was once again displaying his decidedly un-Slytherin tendencies in public.

"I wasn't saying you would!"

"That's exactly what you said!" She glared. "I would be annoyed that an ally of my family was being harassed by something or the other but I would not be upset that Potter was personally upset."

"I'm sorry?"

"You should be." She crossed her arms but allowed the following round of placations as her fiancé pulled her down to his lap and began to lavish affection on her. Blaise suspected that she only allowed such public displays because it made Felix feel better.

"You really should be more careful," she added in a quiet tone to Blaise himself. "Those Inquisitorial idiots have been paying more and more attention to the mail and if it ever got out that you were friends with Potter..." she shrugged. "Warrington will keep them off because of your association with Felix but it only works so many times before the oaf will rat out any suspicious letters."

"Especially ones that make the great Blaise Zabini spill his drink," Felix teased but it was with a heavy dose of caution behind the merriment.

Blaise accepted their words with a nod. Then, his mind weighing heavily on the letter in his bag, hurried out of the hall.

His feet immediately began on the familiar route to the Room of Requirement. He wanted – no, needed – to take his mind off the letter and he couldn't think of anything better than practising his animagus form. As he went, his mind unwillingly lingered on the letter sent by his half-brother.

It wasn't a well-known fact that Lady Zabini's second husband – the father of her sole Heir – had survived their marriage. Most of society assumed that he had died in one of the 'mysterious accidents' that seemed to plague each and every man she brought into her household. As it was, if it weren't for the fact that he had been the one husband to gift her with a child, Shaylee Zabini would have made sure that her second husband's fate had followed that of the first (and later, the third, fourth and fifth).

Still, some of those close to Lady Zabini did know about the real falling out of the marriage and the subsequent divorce. The only part of the story that no one except the Lady and her Heir knew was the real reason Shaylee hadn't arranged for an 'accident' rather than some misguided sense of loyalty for her son.

His father had cheated on his mother – having been clueless to the power his mother truly held over her household (and it was her household – she had always married those of lower rank and encouraged them to take the Zabini name). It had continued for quite some time, while his mother fumed and plotted and eventually became sidetracked by her pregnancy with her adorable baby son, until his father had been forced to admit it to his wife.

His mistress had been pregnant first and was soon to give birth, he loved her, and he wanted to keep the child. Lady Zabini had been furious, naturally, but she couldn't bear to take a child's father away from him – especially when she could see the fearful affection on her husband's face. She drew up the divorce papers and they'd separated – his father eventually marrying the woman he'd betrayed his wife with.

Blaise's half-brother had gone most of his life without knowing about his younger sibling until he'd stumbled across the divorce papers and one of Shaylee's annual letters informing Blaise's father on his second child's health (never let it be said that the Lady wasn't caring).

Cassius D'Angelo had demanded to know the reason for the divorce and his father had explained everything. He'd been furious to know that his father – the man who preached to him about fidelity to the ones you love – had betrayed his former wife as he had. He'd left his home and began writing to Blaise – introducing himself and explaining his situation.

Blaise hadn't believed the first letter and binned it immediately. Cassius had already known he would and hadn't written very much as it was. He sent the second letter with more detail to his little brother and a third to Lady Zabini – begging her to explain to her son and pleading to be allowed contact.

His mother confirmed the second letter and had asked him to hear out his brother. Her eyes were wistful and Blaise felt immediately terrible. Shaylee Zabini's own little sister had died of pneumonia as an infant. He promised his mother to write back at least once and that one time had turned to two and then, all of a sudden, he was communicating regularly with Cassius D'Angelo.

He was so consumed by the thoughts of his brother's neat handwriting on the outside of the letter and the sharp, scrawling, silvery print that was Ravus' signature ink on the inside that he hardly noticed Neville's presence until the other boy reached out and yanked him round to face him.

"What was all that about?" the Gryffindor demanded. "Do you know how incredibly suspicious it is for Blaise Zabini to get riled up by anything?"

"No one pays attention to me when they look at Slytherin. They look at our lovely blonde poster boy."

"That isn't the point; Luna could see the letter from where she was sitting and she felt the need to come and tell me that you had a letter

with silver ink hiding in your bag.” He cast a wary eye over Blaise. “Now, there may not be very many Purebloods in Gryffindor but there are enough informed half-bloods who could make the connection between silver ink and Ravus.”

“This is worthy of note because...?”

“You threatened Ron Weasley with your family’s association the other day,” Neville replied scathingly. “You did it in defence of Harry Potter’s actions; if anyone made the connection between Harry Potter and Ravus do you know what would happen to his reputation? He has it hard enough as it is, convincing everyone that he’s still loyal to Dumbledore and the Light, without a rumour of consorting with the most notoriously ruthless assassin in the wizarding world breaking free.”

Blaise studied the worry on his sometimes-lover’s face. He hadn’t considered that Potter’s association with him was all that noteworthy but, then again, it was painfully clear that Neville was one of Potter’s now-closest friends. He realized with a sudden clarity that any slurs against Potter were now slurs against the Longbottoms ever since the alliance between the two Heirs was cemented.

He immediately felt guilty and dropped his gaze. Neville made a frustrated noise and thrust his hand out. “Let’s see it.”

He gave the letter to Neville and quietly circled round behind him to read it over his shoulder.

Blaise Zabini,

I fail to see what it is, precisely, about me that makes Lord Voldemort assume I would be willing to submit to him. Nonetheless, I was approached and the messenger was your brother, Cassius D’Angelo.

The boy was tainted by the lingering effects of being exposed to Black magic and I have since endeavoured to have him placed with the monks in their Tibetan temple. Within a few months, your brother should be perfectly fine (though that’s nothing to say about his state

of mind after any length of time with this lot). I, myself, will have enough difficulty turning away yet another round of their insistence that I take one of their mutts home with me.

Do give your mother my apologies for not stopping by despite my proximity to her estate in Britain. No doubt she was not aware of my location at the time but apologize even so.

Sincerely,

Ravus

P.S. Your mother wouldn't happen to have room for a temple dog in her home, would she?

"Temple dog?!" Neville exclaimed incredulously. "Does he know how much some people would kill to have one of them, let alone one gifted willingly?"

"I assume he does," Blaise said, "he just doesn't care. Of course, he isn't being serious when he asks if mother would take the dog from him – she might love to have one but she won't take anything belonging to the monks without their express permission."

"Who's got a temple dog?" the voice was feminine and came from the end of the hall.

The two boys looked up and found Susan Bones standing there with a lion slumping at her feet the minute she stopped walking. Harry Potter stood not far away from her, a silvery winged serpent curled about his shoulders. It hissed at him and he turned his head, uttering one brief rasping hiss in response.

"Hello, Harry," Neville chirruped cheerfully. Harry returned his gaze to the pair and tilted his head. "Susan, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks," she said. The lion at her feet stirred and stared at them with bright golden eyes. "Why are you avoiding the question?"

“Why does Potter have an Occamy round his neck?” Blaise asked.

“Not an Occamy,” Harry quipped. “Coatl. Though she isn’t a secret, I’d still rather she wasn’t spread about the school, you know?”

Blaise smiled at the other. Harry’s tone hadn’t been anything but friendly but the Slytherin could still detect the faint stoniness that had underlain his words. Harry wasn’t willing to divulge any secrets just so that Susan’s question would go answered and he was willing to let the whole thing go if Blaise would just make a move.

“Nobody has a temple dog,” he said with a tinge of exasperation added for effect. “My mother just sent me a letter telling me about a friend of hers who had the honour of being allowed to help birth a litter of them recently. She’s very jealous but wanted to share the information right away.”

Susan eyed him flatly. “Right,” she said. “Curiosity – trait of cats, you know?” She nudged the lion – her familiar – with her foot pointedly.

“Perfectly understandable,” he returned with a nod, closing the discussion.

She sniffed quietly and walked away - the lion clambering to its feet and following after her silently. Harry watched her go, utterly unperturbed at the lack of farewell. He made as if to leave but paused to give Neville a searching look. The other Gryffindor shook his head and the tenseness Blaise hadn’t noticed left his shoulders.

“See you back at the dorm?” he offered.

“Paladine can take my canopy tonight,” was Neville’s reply. Something in Potter’s eyes flashed and he left with a nod.

Neville waited a minute before speaking again. “Forward that to your mother.”

“I was planning to.”

“In the meantime,” he continued, ignoring Blaise, “you can explain to me just what you were planning to do before I told you what you should do.”

He felt the beginning of a blush rising. There were times he forgot just how well Neville actually knew him. He had originally wanted to send a letter back to the infamous assassin demanding his brother's release, Black magic be damned. The assassin had been known for his flighty decisions to save people only to dispose of them later. He'd wanted to ensure that it wouldn't happen to his brother but, upon second thought, perhaps it would have only provoked Ravus.

Rather than admit to not thinking his plan through, he gave up the secret he'd been keeping all week. “How would you feel about coming out?”

“Excuse me?”

“I want to ask your Grandmother permission to court you. Then I want to come out to the school officially rather than just understood but unmentioned.”

Neville's eyes were narrowed at the evasion. Blaise could tell from the way his back had shot ramrod straight that he hadn't expected such a thing from his sometimes-lover-mostly-friend. “Are you just avoiding the question by distracting me with this? Because if you are, I will tear you apart. Joking about this is not an appropriate response to a question you don't want to answer. Especially when you mention asking my Gran's permission.”

“I'm not kidding.” Blaise felt the hurt like a physical blow. He knew how it sounded but he hadn't considered that Neville thought so little of his feelings towards the other boy. “I just...I'd rather not consider the pain I would have put you through if I'd gone with my first instinct to demand Cassius back.”

The look Neville gave him made him understand just what Neville thought of that course of action. He winced and hesitantly opened his arms to the other male. Neville came into them grudgingly, letting his own hands rest at Blaise's hips while he frowned up at him.

"Continue," he prompted curtly.

"I just thought that perhaps it was time to give up the charade. Everyone knows we're together, why not confirm it to the rest of the world?"

"That," Neville snarled softly, "is an entirely stupid idea. Yes, we've dated and yes, we do like each other but we aren't a couple. Not really. Couples go through trials and stand by each other. Now, I'm not going to lie; we haven't had to face anything particularly difficult and we've certainly split enough times simply because we came too close for comfort to being outed. What makes you think that coming out on this relationship will make anyone think better of us?"

"Because this time we're making the choice ourselves." Blaise saw the flare of uncertainty and pressed on. "So we haven't had a normal relationship, big deal! We know that we're compatible and I know that I really like you and I'm willing to come out - for you. Not because I want to admit to the world that I'm gay but because I want to admit to the world that I lo-"

"Don't finish that sentence," Neville interrupted. "Okay, I get it and I guess....I guess I agree with you." He smiled hesitantly.

"Good." Blaise felt contentment rise up in him. Felt the possessive satisfaction of his lupine animagus as it curled within his mind. He grinned and Neville's smile widened and the Zabini heir felt as if there was nothing that could ruin this moment.

Cassius was first aware of the light. He spent a good minute blinking up at a rosy-coloured stone ceiling. "You're awake. Good." He turned his head to see an elderly male with a shaved head peering at him curiously. "I must tell Ravus."

"Wait!" Telling Ravus meant letting the assassin know that he still existed and Cassius really didn't want to remind the man that he was still alive after being as rude as he'd been.

It was too late. The monk (and he was undoubtedly one of the line of magical monks - the only in the magical world) had already disappeared beyond the yellow curtain that served as a door. Cassius stared in frozen horror and quickly started to inspect the room he found himself in - searching desperately for an alternate exit if things with Ravus went downhill.

The only exit was the entranceway since the window was so narrow he wasn't entirely sure he could fit through it. Just as he prepared to get out of bed and get out before anyone returned, the sound of heavy boots clicking on wood echoed into the room. The monk had worn sandals and made quiet shuffling noises when he had walked.

The curtain was pushed aside and Ravus entered the room, letting the fabric fall back into place behind him carelessly. He stared at the faintly trembling Cassius blankly for some time.

"Another week or so should suffice," he said. Cassius started terribly and felt himself shiver involuntarily when a flash of amusement slashed through the jade gaze.

"W - what?"

"For the monks and their temple to purge the Black from your magic coils," Ravus elaborated. "I took the liberty of informing your brother of your whereabouts. Lady Zabini and I are on friendly terms and I'd rather not spoil that by neglecting to inform her only son of where his dear brother is."

"You...wrote to Blaise?" his alarm had to be palatable and yet Ravus remained unperturbed.

"It was disguised as one of your letters." It was unnerving how the assassin knew precisely his concern. "Still, I've heard that he almost let it out that I contacted him. The Longbottom heir is observant though and so nothing got out." Ravus's head tilted to one side as if considering the boy. "They are a good pair. You should be proud."

He was speechless. How did one deal with an assassin whose reputation preceded him no matter where he went? What was he supposed to say?

He was saved from blurting out something just to ease the tension (well, his tension; Ravus seemed perfectly relaxed) by the sharp, high yip from beyond the curtain door.

The assassin turned, staring at the dark shadow cast on the lower portion of the entryway. A low growl sounded and amusement tugged the corner of Ravus's lip up into a semblance of a smile. The growl cut off and the curtain flew up in the wake of the charging puppy that came barrelling into the room.

It was a stony-grey colour with darker fur highlighting sinewy muscle the pup had already begun to develop. It was built more like a lion than a dog but the long snout and flopping ears were entirely canine. Thick rolls of fur and skin started on its face, thickened round its head in a mane, and gradually evened out down its body. The paws were huge and the pup seemed to have trouble walking properly, tripping as it turned round to bark once at the curtain that had so hindered its progress.

"Hello little lion," Ravus murmured. The pup flopped to its belly in its haste to face Ravus. It righted itself far more quickly this time and yipped cheerfully, bounding up to the assassin's feet and bumping its head against his legs affectionately. "Didn't I leave you with the rest of them?"

The temple dog pup stared blankly, tongue lolling. The assassin sighed and crouched down to balance on the balls of his feet, reaching out and rubbing a hand over the pup's head. It leaned into the touch and let loose a low, growling purr.

The sight was just so absurd; it was about as far from the imagine of the infamous assassin as Cassius could imagine. The whole situation made his head reel and he felt hysterical laughter bubble in his throat.

Ravus watched him as he gasped for breath, emotionless and unmoving but for the steady rub of the temple dog's head. Once

Cassius had himself back under control, Ravus spoke. "Feel free to explore the grounds - the monks will be sure to let you know if you intrude anywhere you aren't supposed to be. This one," he nudged the pup away and it went with a cheerful disposition to sit by the door, "will take you around. Actually, that might get you a better tour than you'd otherwise get. The monks don't deny their hounds anything."

It seemed as if this was all the assassin had come to say. He turned and left the room. Cassius stared after him, bewildered that he hadn't extracted any oaths or information or even cast a single spell.

The pup barked sharply and he jumped. It stared at him briefly with what he swore was scepticism before turning and marching out the curtained door. The wizard watched it go, scrambling to his feet to follow when the dog stuffed its head back under the curtain to glare at him balefully.

He emerged into a sunny courtyard with long stalks of bamboo and a stream running through the small pond in the centre then off underneath a building to the left and out of sight. Massive colourful koi swam in lazy circles as birds chirped merrily from the trees. It was picturesque and exuded calming, ancient magic.

"Where...?"

"We don't have a name for this place anymore - much as we don't have a name for ourselves. Magical brethren know us simply as The Monks and it suits us just fine," the voice belonged to a young boy who tilted his head, letting long blonde hair flop into his face and handsome blue eyes. He wore simple brown shorts, leather sandals, a white t-shirt and carried a stony grey puppy in his arms carefully. "You must be the man Gabriel brought."

"Gabriel?"

"Oh, right," the boy shook his head. "You'd know him as Ravus. He's a mage and he helped seal up the break in the wards last year when some of the Guardians got it into their heads to leave the Temple and explore the anchoring mountains. They came back eventually but not

before the wards failed and we almost overlapped this Realm with Earth.”

The boy spoke like every word coming out of his mouth made perfect sense - and to him, it probably did - but to Cassius it was all just gibberish. “What?”

“He’s a wizard, Callum.” Ravus was suddenly back, standing in the courtyard and the pup barked as it ran full-tilt into his legs, bumping its head once more against his leg in affection. The assassin blinked and nudged it gently until it rolled to its back and Ravus could rub its belly with the edge of his boot. “Everything you said probably went right over his head.”

“Wizard?” the boy cast him a suspicious look, petting the puppy in his arms nervously. “Why’d you bring one of them? I thought maybe he was another vampire or something.”

“Don’t be rude. Black is nothing like Dark and you know it.”

“Tch, whatever.” The boy tossed his head and Cassius gaped at the long pointed ear that poked from behind the blonde. “I’ve got puppies to feed. Want me to take yours too?” he pointed at the contentedly stretching dog at Ravus’s feet.

“He already ate.”

The boy, Callum, cast the dog a look. “Looks like that wasn’t the only thing he did; the pup’s bonded to you.”

“Yes.” Ravus frowned. “Instead of the wards. The monks thought he was slow to bond but really the sneaky little thing was waiting for me to come back.”

“Well at least we know he’s yours just as much as you’re his.”

Ravus’s eyes flashed, power flared and the boy yelped. Cassius turned and was startled to see what had to be a spell fall from the boy’s face to reveal a trio of thick scars running from one temple to his chin. He snarled at the assassin, revealing pointed fangs, and

drew the puppy close to his chest. It turned its head to lick his chin and the boy froze before every tensed muscle relaxed.

"They're as faint as they're ever going to be," Ravus said.

"Shut up, Gabriel."

"You, my little elf, are entirely too vain for your own good." Ravus smirked and crossed the distance between them to ruffle Callum's hair. "Consider yourself lucky that those three scars are the only thing you suffered for leaving Court."

"I know," a smile quirked the corner of his lips upward. "I'm going to go feed the new puppies."

"Take the Wizard with you."

Callum turned. His eyes were still blue but now sported cat-like pupils. They thinned as he observed Cassius standing silently in the courtyard watching their conversation. He shivered. "Will do."

"Don't play your games with this one - the pup approves."

Callum's face twisted in distaste. The scars made the expression a terrible one. The pup in his arms twisted again and snuffled under his chin. A shimmer of magic twisted through the air and the scars on his face disappeared and the horrible snarl of disgust that had transformed his face was just a slight grimace on a blond-haired, angelic little boy.

The expression faded and Callum smiled brilliantly, ruffling the puppy and lifting it into the air. It barked cheerfully and the smile softened - lighting his eyes up like stars. "Well, come on mister Wizard. Gabriel says a tour and I won't deny our mage something within my power to grant."

TBC...

Chapter#33

Hermione was sulking. She knew it and hated herself for it but she couldn't stop it. The pain in her abdomen was throbbing - her moonsblood at its height - and she wanted nothing more than to curl up in her bed and stay there for the rest of the day. Kirra had stubbornly pushed through her own each month, snarling at Harry when he tried to make her rest but Hermione did not think the same as a Queen or as a Kaeleer raised witch. As far as she was concerned, if she was in pain and someone wanted to fuss, they could go right ahead. She was perfectly capable of setting boundaries and growling them away when they tried to push past those.

Of course, none of that mattered because there wasn't a male to fuss over her. Ron just gave her odd looks when she started growling at her books or when she trounced him in chess through uncharacteristically vicious tactics that even had the chessmen cowering under the anger in her commands. Harry was busy between the DA, his usual secret activities, schooling, and the different lessons with Kirra he was still doing. There was no one else in the school she was close enough with to care to fuss.

It made her feel like crying.

Her hands gripped the unfinished letter to Lucien she'd been in the process of writing. She couldn't even concentrate. She wanted...something. Her frustrated snarl had Ron looking up warily from his homework. He scrutinized her for a moment and the gently shut his book with a sense of finality, standing and coming to her side.

She blinked at him as he helped her up. He frowned. "Look, you're going to Madam Pomfrey and she'll get you...whatever it is you need. I'm not stupid; I know that you're upset for something to do with the Blood. Pomfrey spent time with Kirra so she knows enough about them that she'll know what to do."

So Hermione found herself in the hospital wing where Poppy Pomfrey quickly shuffled Ron away. The middle-aged matron stared at her for a long moment, cast a quick wordless spell, and nodded in satisfaction at the red glow that appeared at the tip of her wand.

“What is it?” Hermione knew what it was. She just wanted to know what Pomfrey was going to do with what she found out.

“There’s nothing I can do for you, my dear.” She shook her head. “But I do know someone who can help. Just give me a moment.” She vanished into the side-room and shut the door behind her, leaving Hermione alone on the bed.

When Kirra popped up from around the edge of the curtains Hermione jumped. The girl grinned silently and disappeared into the office in a whirl of black school robes. The bushy-haired witch could hear the immediate hum of excited conversation and sighed. Kirra was okay but she was a Queen and just so different from Hermione that the poor girl didn’t know how to deal with her.

The two in the office still hadn’t emerged and Hermione felt boredom rapidly descend. She glanced to the bedside table to see if Madame Pomfrey had brought any new novels up for her patients to read. Hermione had, through the many adventures at Harry’s side, found herself in the Hospital wing for often lengthy periods of time. She’d worked her way through every book several times over but she’d be willing to suffer through them again if it meant relieving her boredom.

She scowled at the empty shelf. Apparently, the matron was in the process of replacing the books and so there wasn’t a single one in sight. She crossed her arms and sulked, feeling a mood come over her.

Why did she have to get curious about the Blood? Why did she simply insist that Kirra let her try her Birthright Ceremony? Why couldn’t she have just let it be? No, instead she had insisted and gotten her jewels and now she was suffering more than she had to each and every month.

It was enough to make her want to scream.

“Witchling,” someone purred. She stiffened at the voice. She knew that voice. “How are you feeling, little witchling?”

She turned her head and fixed the worst scowl she could muster on the male. Kirra grinned at her over his shoulder and skipped merrily out of the wing. Pomfrey hid a smile and returned to her office, shutting the door. Hermione wished she could do the same thing to the curtains. Suddenly, her wish for someone to fuss over her seemed like the single most stupid idea she'd ever had - trumping even the time-turner incident of the previous year.

"Lucien," she couldn't ignore him for much longer and he didn't look like he was going to go anywhere anytime soon, "what brings you to Earth?"

His gold-green eyes glimmered in amusement. "Why, my darling sister called me here to help deal with a witch on her moontime, of course. Imagine my surprise when it turned out to be none other than you, witchling."

"Not so surprising when the only two witches in this school are Kirra and I..." she muttered. His sly smile turned into a smirk and the glimmer of amusement in his eyes turned positively wicked.

"How can I help you? Did you try that brew I gave you the recipe for?"

"Yes," she snapped, irritated that he would think she'd forget. "But I ran out of ingredients last month and some of them are expensive and I couldn't justify taking them out of the school's supply and my parents only give me so much spending money a month."

His eyes were darker, or was that just her?

"Why didn't you tell me? I could have bought them for you."

She huffed. "I didn't want to impose."

He stiffened and she realized it was the wrong thing to say. He peered at her, hurt, anger, incredulity, anger at the words warring for dominance on his face. The breath he sucked in was tight and forcibly calm. She felt the dark throb of his power rising around them, saw the glazed look begin to creep into the edges of his eyes, and scrambled for a way to correct her mistake.

“You didn’t want to what?”

She hunched over slightly, pressing against the pillows as he leaned forward to stare directly into her eyes. “Impose?” she murmured, wincing when he sucked in another tight breath. “I’m sorry; I just thought...I could handle it on my own. I’d done it before I was Blood and I could do it after.”

He continued to stare at her for a long, tense moment. Then he heaved a shaky sigh. “May the Darkness have mercy; you are the most trying female I have ever had the pleasure to meet.”

She felt the indignation rise and forgot her earlier desire to be as small as possible. She sat up and prodded him in the chest with one finger. “I am not trying. I am perfectly logical. It’s not my fault that you...freak out over one tiny little thing!”

He was smiling at her again and the amusement only fuelled her annoyance. “Stupid male,” she snarled. He laughed and the smooth ripple of the laughter caused her attention to be drawn to the way the muscles of his throat shifted and the way the top few buttons of his white shirt were undone to reveal the beginnings of sculpted muscle throughout his chest. She noticed idly that the white made his golden-brown skin practically glow.

She wondered if the room had gotten warmer or if it was just her.

Lucien felt the satisfaction curl in his chest at the flustered look that had appeared when he’d laughed. He reigned in the seductive tendrils he’d let loose reluctantly. She looked delightfully disheveled when her eyes were cloudy with lust.

“Now, your matron has assured me that you are excused from classes today. What would you like to do with your free time?”

“I’m excused from classes!” She looked as if she was in physical pain from the revelation. “For the whole day?” Her eyes were narrowed in wary curiosity - unwilling to hear confirmation of what must have been terrible news to her studious sensibilities.

"For the whole day," he confirmed. He resisted the urge to chuckle at the semi-frustrated, semi-hysterical shriek she uttered. Her arms crossed over her chest and she scowled at the bedclothes, looking the entire world like a sulking cat.

"It's not that bad..." she said moodily. "I can still attend classes."

"The matron does not believe you. Neither do I, for that matter," he added for good measure. He fixed her with his best unmovable look. She continued to scowl but now he was the subject of her displeasure, rather than the crisp hospital blankets. It made him feel warm inside. A grumpy witch displeased with him was something he dealt with at home all the time. He had a feeling that his darling witchling would come around from her stubborn denial that she was still a wizard-witch rather than a Blood-witch.

"What on earth am I supposed to do if I'm not in classes?" she asked of the empty air.

"I can think of a few things I could teach you," he offered.

She fixated on him so quickly he was surprised she hadn't given herself whiplash. He blinked, startled and slightly upset that the offer of knowledge had made that hunger in her eyes appear when his seductive tendrils hadn't. Still, he had her attention - her full attention - and that made him absolutely delighted. He smiled at her, letting some of the seductive tendrils play about the air, and grinning wider when the glazed look mingled with the hunger.

"Well," she demanded, glaring at him pointedly as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, "let's go."

"Easy!" His eyes widened and he reached out to steady her when she winced heavily and bent around her abdomen. "First," he began, "let's get a moontime brew into you, alright?" He called in the mug and heated it with a tongue of witchfire before handing it to her. She sniffed it warily before sipping. He admired the way her eyes lit up in delight and felt the smug male satisfaction that came from making a female happy and at ease.

“Well?” She demanded, eyes narrowed again.

“Not until your fourth day,” he grinned at her unrepentantly. “You haven’t made your Offering yet so there isn’t a jewel other than the one you wear to fall back on. My cousin Surreal, for example, can wear her Birthright Green on her third day - with considerable effort, of course - and she can wear it just fine on her fourth day and she has the ability to wear her Grey if she really had to.”

“Then what are we going to do for the next two days?” the snarl underlying her voice was adorable. His cousin had always told him that he should marry an Eyrien woman - they were sweet but snarly when pushed. Thinking of the way his mild Aunt always snarled Daemonar away from anything he could break or dirty up, he couldn’t help but see his cousin’s point.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

She snarled at him again and he laughed. No, perhaps all he had wanted was a light-jeweled witch who wasn’t afraid to snarl at him when she thought he was being obtuse.

“How’s that snake-tooth of yours?” Kirra had slipped into the seat beside his in the library where he was diligently working on a transfiguration essay. He blinked and looked up at her, tilting his head silently to see her around the fading sunlight streaming in from the window. “Do you need to milk it again yet?” she clarified.

Harry grinned. The snake-tooth that had emerged during Christmas had been milked once after the initial build-up of poison. It hadn’t bothered him since and he’d gotten Ginny to continue tinting his nails black to cover the dark little tooth beneath the nail. It was a deadly weapon that signified his status as a natural Black Widow. One of the three males in known existence and the only one on Earth.

Impressive, to be sure, but a trait he had kept quiet. The Wizarding world wasn’t accepting of differences - his Parseltongue being the first example to spring to mind - and he’d rather they not find out about the hypodermic little tooth beneath his ring finger. Especially

not since the venom sac contained a poison almost equal to a basilisk's.

"No," he said. "It's fine. Paladine found out though, and she is highly impressed. Although, she thinks it odd that it only produces one type of venom. She is of the opinion that if it is so special, it should be more special."

The young Queen still looked worried. "We really should begin your hourglass training," she said.

"I'm not sure that it's the best idea quite yet..."

"I understand your position, I do," she began, nibbling on her lip nervously, "but it isn't safe to leave you untrained. What if you start messing about and accidentally spin a web you can't control?"

He bristled at the implication. She frowned at him. "No need to get snarly. It has happened before, you know."

The hint of Queen voice calmed him. "I know. That's why KaeAskavi brings me lessons from Kaeleer each time he visits. He knows a Kindred Black Widow who doesn't mind teaching a human. Rex takes any questions I have back to her when he delivers messages."

"Her?" He heard the curiosity. "Who?"

He shrugged. "A Queen in Arachna. They don't have a name for her - just a...can I show you?"

She blinked and nodded. There was a brush against his mind and he reached out with the lightest of psychic threads, gold-Queen-Red-sparks-in-the-darkness. It wasn't so much a name as it was a feeling, a scent in the darkness, an impression of what the Kindred Black Widow was. Kirra beamed at the impression he'd sent her and bobbed her head. "Oh! Her. That's alright then - she's very good."

"You've met?"

“No, but I’ve seen her from a distance. She’s like...my fist and she’s gold and shimmers, you know? The younger Kindred really like her. If the Arachnians would let them in their territory, I think a lot of the Warlord Princes would join her court.”

“Oh.” Harry didn’t particularly care. He glanced at his wristwatch and blinked in surprise. “Oh! I should get going. I have a lesson with Snape tonight.” The nature of the lessons had necessitated telling Kirra what they were really about. She nodded in response and waved a hand.

“Then go; I don’t want you late on my account.”

Harry gathered up his things and vanished them with a wave of his hand. The Sapphire on his ring flared briefly then died. He extended that tendril of power and felt about for the twisted Winds that flowed through Hogwarts. The magic in the castle acknowledged his presence and, in a generous mood, it didn’t fight against him.

Kirra had originally been the only one capable of the feat but nowadays – with a greater knowledge of Craft and considerably more time to discover the limits of mingling it with magic – Harry could ride the twisted Winds in the wards just as well as she, albeit not as quickly.

He appeared in a section of the dungeons he knew were unoccupied. It was a tricky landing; he only had a few square feet to appear in else he’d drop into existence where a wall was. He knew how to pass through walls, of course, but that didn’t make it any less unnerving to see and feel the stone touching him and going through him as he made his way to a place he could be safely corporeal.

He made the landing with only one shoulder jutting into stone and the wood of the closet door. Harry shifted and passed the rest of the way through with only a minor shiver of unease. One glance told him he’d make it in perfect time and so he made his way leisurely to Snape’s office.

The Professor was extracting memories to store away in a borrowed Pensieve. Harry didn’t mind and he didn’t let the idea that the

Professor considered his growing proficiency threat enough to remove his more important secrets go to his head. He waited patiently for the older man to finish and tilted his head slightly when he turned to face him.

“Let us see what you’ve managed since last, Mr Potter.” Severus Snape said and then murmured the incantation and slipped past the initial shimmering Sapphire shields that fooled most intruders.

Harry felt his Sapphire shields chime in warning and draw him within his mind while allowing him to simultaneously keep an eye on his Professor’s physical body. It had been the first thing he’d learned to do after being shown the weakness in his mental defences.

The aural shield he snapped up was a precaution he wasn’t willing to forgo – never mind the energy he would be using to build up the mental side of his defence.

The forbidden forest sprang up around him – twisting and twining about into darkness where sparks of Sapphire light blinked in and out of existence. Harry stepped carefully to the edge of the glade he’d made his true centre and nodded to the silently staring mental KaeAskavi.

The Arcerian didn’t speak to him as it would in real life, but the amused swish of his tail and the faint whisper of a growl was so much the other Warlord Prince that it made up for it. He tilted his head curiously and KaeAskavi deliberately nodded. Snape was inside already then. He murmured his thanks and continued to climb out of the twisted roots that caged in the clearing.

Little spiders sat motionless in suspended webs of spidersilk and they plucked the threads of his memories and protections as he moved past them. The resonations shifted the forest beyond the stretch of his perception and he continued on the most obvious path.

Thestrals were a sign that he approached the edge of his centre and the location of Severus. They nickered softly – the foal he’d first formed now a large dark male with gleaming fangs nudged him

affectionately – as he passed. He pet its nose and watched it dash away to clear his path.

Hogwarts appeared through the tree line and he glanced at it briefly. The owlery was still – the birds within slumbering – and that meant that no one was near his emotional hub. He glanced at the lake and the Squid's lazily flailing tentacles and knew that nothing had tried to enter the Forest from that side.

That left Hagrid's cabin and the Whomping Willow to check.

Fang wasn't a part of Harry's mental defences. He just couldn't picture the boarhound as a ferocious beast after being slobbered on every time he came to visit. Shadow – sulky and distrustful - instead prowled between pumpkin patch and cabin, growling angrily. Harry summoned up his mental defences and the owlery at the castle burst to life. The owls swopped in a spiralling search pattern and stopped to circle when they located the elusive potions master.

He found Severus in a clearing he recognized as one where he'd once been dropped off by Firenze after a disastrous detention in his first year. The Centaur was absent and the Professor was idly examining the extent of the forest he could see.

"Professor," Harry said.

Snape turned to face him and nodded briefly. "You've gotten much better." He complimented. "I had been almost certain you would appear here."

Harry felt the clearing and then shook his head. "Ah, some of my memories wander away from my centre. They are usually insignificant ones but they provide a suitable distraction if needed."

"Indeed. Clever." The potions master turned and returned to his examination. "Some of these do not feel very much like your magic, Mr Potter."

"That's because they aren't my memories, strictly speaking," he said. He tugged his collar and shifted warily from foot to metaphorical foot.

“I’d thought they were worse than they really were but Saet...um, a friend, assured me that they weren’t really what I thought they were.”

He was referring to the memories of torture and destruction Daemon had given him. He’d thought the sheer enormity of the memories meant that it was everything Daemon had to offer. Really, Saetan had explained, it was only a short period of time – back when Daemon had been desperately waiting for Witch to be born. The High Lord of Hell hadn’t been pleased that one of his boys had been put through things like that in the first place, let alone giving them to another, but he’d understood that Harry had needed the crash-course on how destructive a Warlord Prince could be. Harry needed to understand what he was capable of and how to channel his power into something worth the effort. It had been crude and traumatizing but nothing that Harry hadn’t been able to heal from.

Still, he wasn’t ready to admit to Severus Snape that the High Lord of Hell occasionally acted as his guardian – with all the fierce protective love that only Saetan could manage for his children.

“Who did this?” Snape had caught the whiff of uncertainty – of weakness – and wasn’t going to let it go. Harry felt the unease and cool fury begin to seep into his mind. The sky clouded over and darkened. The Raijin stirred in its slumber, hovering between his mind and his core – invisible, intangible, but there.

“A friend.” Harry wouldn’t let Snape find those memories; wouldn’t let him touch anything between himself and the other Warlord Princes of Kaeleer. They were private and he was going to make sure they stayed that way.

“Tell me, Mr Potter.” The silky edge was fraying under the sharp bite in Snape’s voice.

Harry snarled at him wordlessly and nearly fell over when Snape disappeared. There was no voice, just the sense of determination to find his secrets lingering in a smoky blackness that began to swallow up his surroundings.

The circling raptors shrieked defiance and dove at the smoke but it wasn't a tangible thing for their claws to injure. The Thestrals were tied to death and attacked it – seeming to stop it with their mere presence. But the smoke whirled and disappeared – drifting on the winds of his mind – only to reappear above the forest, streaking determinedly to his centre and his core.

The cold fury of the killing edge was taunting him. He had to protect those memories; he had to keep Snape out of his centre. His centre and his core – the core of his Self that made him Blood – were merging and fragile. If Snape went through that without Harry to let him in...

He roared, furious that he couldn't shift to his other form while within his mind. He reeled when his roar was echoed.

In the Darkness between his wizard-mind and Blood-Self, the Raijin opened its eyes and snarled.

The world fell away and the killing edge merged with the Raijin's boundless energy. Harry could see Snape's mind as the smoke it was but, in the Darkness, the Raijin was a burst of Sapphire light and it could be just as intangible as and even more deadly than smoke.

The Raijin accepted his memories and emotions, accepted his killing edge and his Sapphire power, accepted his still unknown Offering power, his familiars' bonds and everything that made Harry, Harry and shifted into a cackling streak of lightning. The electricity made Harry remember his other form and suddenly Harry and the Raijin and Harry's Self-Mind were one being and Harry knew that Snape couldn't learn his secrets because the Raijin wasn't going to let him anymore than Harry wanted to let him.

The cold fury of the Killing Edge urged him to chase the smoke of Snape's mind and it was only when it vanished from the Darkness that Harry blinked and opened his eyes to the physical world.

Snape was watching him warily; wand pointed down in a position that would let him snap out any number of restriction spells. Harry stared at it, the lingering coolness of the Killing Edge fading as the Raijin fell

back into sleep. His head hurt and his body didn't fare much better. He pitched forward but Severus had caught him before he hit the floor.

"Ouch," Harry muttered inelegantly.

"Indeed." Severus had a pinched look about his eyes. "Can you do nothing by halves, Mr Potter? Jumping from an adequately protected mindscape to a final form is not done for a number of reasons – many of which end very poorly."

"Tell that to the universe and she'll laugh in your face," he grumbled. Severus huffed softly and helped him to his feet – letting go only once he was capable of standing on his own. "I didn't mean to let the Raijin do that – I just really didn't want you to see those particular memories. I didn't particularly want to see those memories, myself."

"Let the Raijin?"

Harry blinked and offered a grin that said everything and nothing at all. It was a look he'd picked up from Daemon and it appeared to warn Severus off enough that he didn't continue his line of questioning.

A woman's scream from somewhere above them made Snape's head jerk upwards. He gazed at the ceiling in bewilderment. "What the -?"

Harry was already moving. It didn't matter that he didn't recognize the scream – he was a Warlord Prince and he would answer that cry of distress.

The cries grew louder as he approached the Entrance Hall and he could feel Severus being left behind as his pace increased.

The Hall was crowded with what must have been most of the school and the keening was at its centre. Harry prowled forward, letting his Sapphire power cloud the air and force people to move out of his way for reasons they didn't understand. A power darker than his own and very familiar edged in to his periphery senses but he ignored it. It was focussed on something else, though just as tense as he.

Professor Trelawney looked like she was coming apart at the seams with the way her shawls and scarves trailed behind her. Two massive trunks lay at the floor, one upside down, and she clutched her wand and a bottle of sherry as though they were her last links to earth. Harry stared blankly, taking in the scene with a calm that he knew was dangerous. The divination professor looked even odder than usual – hair stuck up on end and glasses crooked enough that only one eye appeared magnified.

She was shrieking. “No! NO! This cannot be happening...it cannot...I refuse to accept it!”

“You didn’t realise this was coming?” the high, girlish voice told him everything he needed to know. He had managed to avoid coming to a head with the High Inquisitor – he avoided her classes and she only gave him detention with Filch (the man was gruff but not nearly so much a pain when Mrs Norris made it clear she was fond of him) but it was clear he wasn’t going to be able to manage it this time if someone didn’t do something.

She continued. “Incapable though you are of predicting even tomorrow’s weather, you must surely have realised that your pitiful performance during my inspections, and lack of an improvement, would make it inevitable that you would be sacked?”

“You – you can’t!” Trelawney keened again. “Hogwarts is my home! I – I’ve been – been h-here sixteen years!”

“It was your home,” Umbridge corrected. Harry held back the snarl at the sick enjoyment on her toad-like face, “Right up until this morning when the Minister countersigned your Order of Dismissal.”

He couldn’t take it anymore. He heard Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil let loose sudden sobs and took in their huddled forms, crying quietly into each other’s shoulders. He made his move at the same time his Head of House did but he was closer and crouched down beside the Divination Professor before Minerva could even reach the other’s side.

“Professor,” he used her title in defiance of Umbridge’s announcement. She blinked at him from behind her crooked glasses and he motioned subtly for her to fix them. She straightened them almost without knowing and he smiled reassuringly. “Stop crying.” She was so startled by his sudden concern and presence that she did exactly that. “Now, get up and let’s get your things together, alright? We don’t want them to be simply lying about the entranceway like this for very long, do we? There must be some valuable Seer’s tools in those trunks.”

The goal, the purpose he’d given her, was enough to get her on her feet. He made a motion with his wand and muttered nonsensical words while using his Sapphire to gather everything up neatly in her trunks. She stared at the trunks and began to sniffle again, tears beginning to gather and the beginnings of another bout of keening in her heavy breathing.

“Don’t worry Sybill...it’s not as bad as you think...” McGonagall murmured and offered her co-worker a large handkerchief. “You don’t have to leave Hogwarts...”

Umbridge overheard. “Oh really, Professor McGonagall? And your authority for that statement is...?”

“That would be mine,” said a deep voice that Harry knew all too well.

Dumbledore was framed in the doorway and the mist that had formed during Harry’s Occlumency lesson created a striking image. He didn’t know what the Headmaster had been doing on the grounds but he felt the presence of another male on the other side, waiting unseen. The psychic scent was one he recognized – though it was dulled by the time when he had not known he was Blood. The Raijin sniffed and offered the memory he needed while the Headmaster stood toe-to-toe with Umbridge and informed her that Sybill was to remain at Hogwarts.

Pale blonde hair, blue eyes and a shapely beautiful face...he smiled and recognized the palomino coat gleaming through the mist in the moonlight. “Firenze,” he called, delight chasing away the killing edge and bringing him back to the present. Distantly, he was aware that

he'd ruined the Headmaster's surprise and that Trelawney had been helped away by some of the other professors. He chanced a glance but the old wizard was simply smiling at the recognition, nodding for Harry to continue. It made him suspicious but he returned his attention to the Centaur as he entered the Hall almost hesitantly.

"Harry Potter," Firenze replied. "How nice it is to see you again. I will be your new Divination teacher."

TBC...

Chapter#34

The DA had finally managed to produce several corporeal Patroni. Harry eyed Cho's swan and Hermione's otter with a critical eye. His own stag trotted about him in a circle, surveying the room for a threat and snorting at the other brilliant creatures and wisps of cloud. Usually, a Patronus didn't last for longer than a moment or two without a Dementor to drive off but Harry had been performing the spell since third year when his magic hadn't fully settled. Now, with a core almost completely settled and a mind that had taken its final stage, he could sustain the Patronus for nearly a full thirty minutes.

Hermione's otter faded and she blinked almost sadly before conjuring another and smiling softly at the gleaming little thing. Cho watched her swan make one last circle in the air before she turned to him with a questioningly hopeful expression. He nodded to assure her that it had lasted at least a minute longer and she grinned, returning to her practice with a determined glint.

Harry had set them the goal of producing and then holding the Patronus for at least three minutes but preferably five. That would give them enough time to summon up the strength of will to either escape a Dementor or find a happy enough memory to summon a second Patronus.

His stag reared up briefly to gain his attention. He glanced over and watched Luna perform the charm. Her wand's tip lit up brilliantly for a split second and silver mist spilled forth coalescing and then vanishing abruptly.

He frowned. "Luna?" he made her name a question.

She blinked and then smiled at him, coming over and standing silently with her head tilted to one side. He raised a single eyebrow and waited for her to explain. His stag put its head near his and stared at her as well.

"Snorkacks are invisible," she explained patiently. Her eyes smiled at him from behind a veil of mist. "I can feel the spell like yours but of

course we can't see it. A Crumple Horned Snorkack isn't going to be visible even in a spell."

He laughed and reached out to brush some of her hair back behind her ear. She smiled vaguely at the gesture and then peered over his shoulder at nothing (his stag had wandered off to snort angrily at a small wolf that one of the young Slytherin students had conjured). He made a motion that she continue and she turned to rejoin the group.

Kirra was bouncing about, cooing excitedly at the shining Hell Hound her patronus had taken the shape of. Su Chang stared at the other members, Slytherin badge gleaming proudly on her robes, as if daring them to make fun of the small white rabbit that sat calmly at her feet releasing wisps of silver magic as it remained corporeal for precisely three minutes before fading in a whirl of silver motes.

Lucien sat off to the side, watching Hermione while still keeping a careful eye on his sister and the other Warlord Prince. Harry didn't mind his presence – it made keeping his own instincts in check easier to know that a more powerful Warlord Prince was in the castle should something untoward happen.

Ginny came up and tapped him on the shoulder. He removed his attention from studying the lazy, heated look that periodically made itself known on the Blood male's face. She smiled. "So when do you think we'll be practicing privacy charms? I know it isn't defence but it would defend our secrets, if you think of it that way."

He frowned in confusion. \$ She is trying to ask you to put up a ward so that I can talk to you, my Master. \$ His eyes lit up as his familiar hissed at him and he finally heard the soft whisper of feathers. One pluck of his Sapphire and a flick of his wand conjured a mingled Blood-Wizard privacy ward that would make the students in the room simply see him talking to Ginny and just hear idle chatter about producing a patronus. They could even ask it questions and he'd respond as he would in real life. They just couldn't interact with it but he doubted that any of 'his' students would go that far.

Paladine bobbed her head in pleasure and flapped from Ginny's shoulder to the ground, confusing him momentarily. She blinked at

him once and her form blurred. His eyes widened as he looked down at the large lizard lying at his feet. It blinked at him and its eyes were the same piercing yellow as Paladine's. He let out an involuntary shout and knelt to inspect his familiar.

\$ As you can see, \$ she began smugly, \$ I have remembered how to assume different reptilian forms. I cannot, as of yet, shift into any of my more exotic forms, Coatl excepted. However, I am confident that - given time and practise - I will remember the trick to assuming those as well. \$

"Beautiful," he murmured, running his hand down her back and inspecting the long claws on each of her four legs. "What shape is this?"

"Komodo dragon," Ginny piped up. She grinned. "Of course, she's not a magical komodo dragon since she isn't technically a dragon, but she is the muggle Komodo dragon."

\$ I will remember how to shift soon enough, my Master, \$ Paladine assured him. She flicked her long forked tongue out and tilted her head into his hand. \$ Would you like me to take another form? \$

\$ What else have you got? \$

She hissed at him and shifted into what could only be described as a chimera, though not of the like any Harry had read about. He blinked then raised an eyebrow. \$ I thought you couldn't do exotic forms? \$

She made a noise that translated as a snort. \$ This is a common creature where I used to live. \$

The head was similar to that of the Komodo dragon she'd just been but the body was that of a grey-spotted feline. Her tail blended seamlessly into scales and ended in a tufted bit of blue-hued fur. Her claws were long and sharp and looked odd coming from her feline paws. Still, she had the same yellow eyes and she arched her back into his touch, letting him feel the line of hard spines hidden under the fur.

He hummed acknowledgement and looked up at Ginny. She was grinning faintly and tapped her temple with one finger when he caught her gaze. His eyes darkened at the reminder of what lived within her mind but she shot him a look and he quelled that temper. The shadows in her eyes lightened and she shrugged. "Let's me understand you, at least."

Paladine's head turned abruptly and she snarled; letting him see the fangs that he knew hadn't been in the komodo's head. \$ Someone, \$ she snarled, \$ is coming this way. I can feel them cross over a warning spell. \$

"Someone's coming," he said. He was on his feet and the privacy spell faded. His patronus reared up and charged through the practicing students; gaining their attention and bringing it to Harry. "Someone is coming," he repeated in a louder tone. They gasped and looked panicked.

Lucien had a sight shield up and Hermione with him the moment Harry sent him a brief message through a spear thread. The other Warlord Prince wasn't going to let that hag anywhere near the female he'd chosen and Harry still felt some compassion for the friends that hadn't matured with him. Lucien had Hermione out the door before she could even understand what Harry had meant by someone was coming.

Harry asked for an exit and the room provided. Four doors appeared, each a different colour – red, blue, green, and yellow. He motioned to them and explained, "They should exit right near your common rooms. Go and get to your dorms as quickly as possible. Now!"

The students before him hastily broke for the doors and Harry glanced at Paladine. Her form had shifted but only in size. She was roughly the size of one of the kindred wolves. She blinked at him and rubbed her head against his leg before she prowled through the cat-flap that had appeared in the doorway.

"Harry?" Ginny was the only one left. She had watched Paladine go out into the hallway and had seen Harry take a step away from the doors that would ensure his escape.

"You go ahead, Ginny," he said. She frowned thoughtfully and he smiled, mind linking with his familiars' as they snarled expletives about their esteemed High Inquisitor. "I just want to take care of a few things first."

"Do try not to get expelled," she finally said. "I still need your help making mental shields."

He hummed vaguely and stepped through the doorway into the hall. Paladine was waiting, staring unblinkingly down the hall. The hidden spines were raised all up and down her back and they twitched with every breath. Her forked tongue tasted the air and she tilted her head from side to side, shifting her paws, feeling for the location of the intruders.

"Who is it?" he asked the seemingly empty hall. Paladine hissed.

\$ The Malfoy boy, several of his friends and that awful woman are waiting at the end of the hall. They know you are here, my Master. \$

"Do they?" he raised an eyebrow. "Well, we'll just have to face them, won't we?"

\$ Must we? \$ Her mouth opened and then snapped shut audibly.

He laughed and started down the hallway. She prowled at his feet, sulking in her usual dignified manner. Her long tailed flicked absently from side to side in agitation. He came round the corner and Paladine hissed a dark word in a language that, while in Parseltongue, he still didn't recognize. The trip-jinx flashed out of existence and she purred. He blinked and glanced down in surprise. Huh. His lips curled. She really was adorable.

"Malfoy," he greeted, turning from his familiar. The boy sneered at him and tilted his head to angle his words down the corridor.

"FOUND HIM PROFESSOR!"

"I was lost?" Malfoy was scowling now and Harry laughed darkly as Umbridge came round the corner, scowling and muttering to herself.

"Potter! Excellent, 50 points to Slytherin." Her eyes lit up and he took one step back, snarling silently when she made as if to grab him. She jumped and abruptly aborted her motion. Then her eyes narrowed. "You can come with me to the Headmaster's office, Potter."

"Naturally," he said silkily.

They made it to the Gargoyle guardian after she'd given orders to Malfoy and the rest of her inquisitorial squad for where to check for other students. She seemed not to notice Paladine, despite her continued visibility directly at his heels. His familiar picked up the stray thought and she spoke to him in his mind – a feat she preferred not to use unless absolutely necessary. "Notice-me-not charm is the closest spell to what I am using. She has seen me and knows I am here but it does not register as noteworthy in her mind. It is an ability of this species – they were prey to many of the larger beasts that lived in my time."

He sent the mental equivalent of a nod to her and reached out to embrace Hedwig worriedly. She preened from her place in the owlery and sent an assurance down their link. If the toad-woman ever tried to harm her, she'd be sure to inform Rex and Kaelas and Shadow and every other Kindred she could get her claws on to help. That made him feel better but it was only after she promised to go to Paladine first that he relaxed.

His familiars shared amusement between them at his worrying and promised each other to keep a close eye on their human.

Harry stared at the Minister, turned his gaze on Kingsley and the other Auror who appeared to be acting as guards, took in Percy Weasley hovering excitedly by the wall with quill and parchment in hand, and glanced briefly at his head of House and his Headmaster. They stared at him as well and he realized that it must have been the first time they'd seen him outside of his school uniform. He was wearing sleek leather pants, a crisp white shirt with the top few

buttons undone and a his long mandarin-collared robe he'd worn at his first lesson with Susan.

Paladine shifted and pressed against his leg, whispering assurances he didn't need but accepted anyways.

"Hello," he greeted, crossing his arms in a movement calculated to be casual and not defensive. "Minister. Aurors. Weasley."

There was a definite flush of embarrassment to Percy's cheeks at the careful way he'd injected his surname with disappointment and condescension.

Fudge seemed unable to respond immediately, deflating as if he'd expected Harry to act monumentally different.

"He was headed back to Gryffindor Tower," Umbridge declared with the same disgusting delight in her voice as when she'd attempted to dissolve Trelawney into a sobbing mess on the floor of the Great Hall. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"He did not corner me. I was walking down the hall and he was around the corner. He cast a Trip Jinx that failed spectacularly, seeing as I wasn't running." He shot her a dark look and she scowled at him.

"Well, Potter, I expect you know why you're here?"

"No." Green eyes returned to the Minister and he stared at him blankly. "No, I do not know why I am here, Minister. Last I checked, I was allowed to walk down the hallway wherever I so chose."

"You have no idea why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?" Fudge said sarcastically.

"No school rules."

"Ministry Decrees?" he amended victoriously.

Harry knew without a doubt that he'd broken Ministry Decrees. He also didn't care. "Not that I'm aware of," he told them. He wasn't simply aware he'd broken the rules; he knew without a doubt what he was doing and was delighting in every second of it.

"So it's news to you that an illegal student organization has been discovered within this school?"

"Then the rumour of the Junior Death Eaters has been confirmed? Well that's just wonderful now, isn't it?" His voice dripped sarcasm. "Congratulations Minister, on the amazing discovery; you have won many a student a large sum of money. I, myself, had always bet that they existed."

Umbridge growled furiously and Fudge was starting to look astoundingly like his Uncle, albeit lacking a few hundred pounds. Paladine laughed at his feet and her purr rumbled in her chest.

"What is that?!" The Minister leapt back in alarm, pointing at Paladine. The Aurors shifted and Kingsley subtly nudged his partner into inaction – seeing the look of sudden fury on the teenager's face at the first sign of threat to the creature. Umbridge shrieked and nearly fell over to get away. Percy Weasley began scribbling furiously while eyeing Paladine warily.

"Oh that's just my familiar," Harry said breezily. Paladine leaned into the hand he held out for her.

\$ I am a good familiar, my Master. Even if they know this one form, they will never expect my others and I am confident that nothing they can do will keep me from you. \$

\$ Fair enough, \$ he hissed softly. Percy's scribbling doubled and he grinned. \$ He looks ready to wet his pants. \$

"Surely a dangerous creature?!"

"Not at all," Harry smiled disarmingly, "Classified as a very dangerous beast, of course, but an experienced handler can safely own one."

Naturally, being a Parseltongue is enough to be considered experienced.”

“Definitely illegal,” Umbridge snapped.

“If you contact Gringotts, I am positive they’ll be more than pleased to give you the appropriate documentation.” It had been one of the first things he’d done. Gringotts had a team of wizard-lawyers that they had subtly file the paperwork with the Ministry and now they guarded it as if it were one of his vaults. Umbridge scowled at him and then at Paladine – paling when his familiar bared her fangs in a wide wicked grin.

“P-perhaps you should fetch our informant, Dolores,” Fudge stammered, keeping as far back from Paladine as he was able.

She hurried out of the room, leaving Harry, the Minister, Dumbledore and McGonagall, and the Aurors alone. Harry smiled at them. “Taking a leaf out of the Headmaster’s book, are we Minister?”

Fudge could do nothing but glare with Paladine leaning against her Master’s side and staring at him unblinkingly.

The door opened and Harry tilted his head to see the so-called informer. He laughed lightly when he saw who it was. Marietta Edgecombe scowled at him, ignoring the close purple pustules spelling ‘SNEAK’ across her nose and cheeks, and wrenched herself out of Umbridge’s grasp. “You could have said that this would happen,” she snarled at him, prodding him in the chest.

“Well I hardly knew it would,” he informed her, smiling in amusement. “It certainly wasn’t my idea.”

“Then...oh that witch!” She shrieked angrily and stamped her feet. Paladine twisted to avoid getting her tail stepped on. “I knew she was vindictive but honestly.”

Umbridge seemed startled at the sudden anger in her informant and eyed her askance. Marietta blew some of her brilliant red hair out of

her face and huffed, still glaring but now warily as she peered up at him. "You know the counter?"

"I could counter it," he returned easily. She eyed him and then nodded shortly, turning to the Minister.

"I told the Professor there might be something she wanted to see going on at the seventh floor in the Room of Requirement," she said. "I said there was a meeting but then this," she gestured at her face, "happened and I got so angry I couldn't finish."

"Why don't you finish now, dear?" Umbridge simpered, looking triumphant.

"Alright," she shot Harry another dark look and he continued to grin at her. "Potter here had a meeting with a bunch of students in Hogsmeade awhile back to invite them to a group where he'd help with their assignments and to prepare them for exams." She then clamped her mouth shut, tilted her head to peer at her reflection and promptly blushed a brilliant red and hid her face in her robes.

Umbridge nudged her to continue but she let out a loud abrupt wail that made the toad-like women back up anxiously. Harry smirked and tilted his head in a slight nod at the flat look Marietta sent him.

"The true purpose of this meeting was, of course, not so innocent," Umbridge declared. "It was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has deemed inappropriate for school-age -"

"I'll think you'll find you're wrong there, Dolores," said Dumbledore. He glanced at Harry and the boy tipped his head – Dumbledore would take care of this part.

"Well let's hear it, Dumbledore," Fudge rocked back on the balls of his feet and shot the aged wizard a smug look. "What cock-and-bull story have you designed this time to get Potter out of trouble?! Did he have a twin holding this meeting? A reversal of time, a dead man coming back to life and a couple invisible Dementors?"

Percy laughed and Harry scowled at him. "Oh, very good, Minister, very good!"

"I am not denying – nor, I should think, does Harry – that he held such a meeting. I am merely pointing out that, at the time, the Ministry Decree banning all student societies was not in effect. In fact, it was not put into effect until two days after the meeting."

"And any subsequent meetings?" Umbridge simpered – eyes glinting darkly.

"Would be illegal, of course," Dumbledore said. He peered at her steadily over the edge of his spectacles. "Do you have any proof of any further meetings?"

"Proof? Did you not hear what Miss Edgecombe just told us?"

"Marietta," Harry turned to her and smiled a dangerously pleasant smile. "Are you reporting nearly six months worth of meetings or just that first one?"

She was still hiding her face stubbornly and, although her eyes glimmered with tears, they still burned at him. She nodded her head sharply and his smile widened to even more frightening proportions.

"Yes, what?" Umbridge barely managed to keep her tone civilized. Paladine's tail curled and uncurled about her hind legs.

"Are you reporting six months worth of meetings?" Harry queried, his tone matching the horrific grin.

She shook her head 'no' and glanced over his shoulder, to the side, where Kingsley Shacklebolt stood. Harry heard the whisper of a spell and gently shifted so that he could deflect it. Her eyes flamed angrily at the spell sent by the Auror but he shook his head fractionally and she desisted.

"I don't think she understands the question," Umbridge announced, glancing nervously at the minister. Harry took the interruption to turn and fix Kingsley with a look. The Auror raised an eyebrow at him and

he made a motion with his hand for the Auror to leave things be – Harry had it under control. “Have you been going to these meetings for the past six months, dear?”

Marietta shook her head firmly.

“What do you mean by shaking your head, dear?” asked Umbridge testily.

“I think her meaning is quite clear,” McGonagall said primly. “There have been no meetings, have there?” Marietta nodded her head.

Paladine watched the proceedings, amused that her presence went unnoticed the minute the toad-woman tried to salvage the situation despite the absence of her spells.

Umbridge continued to question Marietta and she – growing more frustrated – continued to shake her head. There had been no meetings. She yelped and struggled when Umbridge tried to shake her physically but Kingsley and Dumbledore – looking magnificently upset – put a swift end to that.

The ancient being felt the power stirring under the Headmaster’s veneer of kindness and she hissed softly. It was nothing compared to her own power; but while her power was dormant and inaccessible, his was alive and writhing and within the palm of his hand. She disliked the realization and resolved to work harder to regain her former glory for the sake of her beloved Master.

She missed what was said next; it was all a blur and it was all in English and she couldn’t translate English as fast as she would have liked. But she gathered that the piece of parchment being displayed victoriously was something important and was going to get her Master in trouble.

The Headmaster said something which she missed, busy calculating how much she would have to change to regain her usual venom so that she could dissolve that bit of parchment, and so when there were suddenly spells flying about the room she hissed and rose up on her hind legs. The vast well of magic within her small body crashed upon

her like a tidal wave and she snapped and grabbed the power, forming a tight, coiled lash through sheer force of will.

Magic rippled and twisted about her Master, deflecting any spells that might have brushed him, before settling back under her control again – returning to the smooth calm well that was as inaccessible as ever. The phoenix in the corner trilled softly, a note that no human could pick up but that her superior hearing did.

“Your Master is a dear fledgling, but he is certainly a nuisance when he puts his mind to it.” Magical creatures, by their nature, could always understand one another.

\$ My Master, \$ she hissed in reply, \$ is only a nuisance because your human constantly meddles in his private affairs. \$

“My human-friend is old and has seen much. He does not always realize that his path is not the only path. He will learn eventually, although not anytime soon, I am afraid.”

\$ You keep your friend from my Master and all will be well between us, Phoenix. \$ Black eyes filled with the light of a thousand burning stars stared at her and she flicked her tail slowly. The magic swelled and filled her eyes, letting the phoenix see the power at her disposal – the knowledge of ages even he could not remember. The long, graceful neck bowed in a humble gesture and she slowly lowered herself back to all fours.

Harry looked at her, hearing her half of the conversation. Dumbledore was standing close to Fawkes, who had turned his head and started to sing softly. McGonagall was climbing to her feet with Marietta in tow. The girl looked shaken from the sudden flurry of spells but Paladine didn't particularly care. Her Master was safe and that was all she cared about.

The Headmaster was speaking again, looking worried. “Miss Edgecombe...”

“Will not say a thing, Headmaster,” Harry said. Her Master looked deceptively calm for someone she could feel was simmering with a

barely repressed fury at the attempted attack on a female's mind. "We have an understanding, don't we Marietta?"

Paladine felt it prudent to remind the girl to curb her tongue and hissed dangerously. Marietta took one look at the raised hair and slowly twitching tail and nodded wordlessly, paling slightly.

"I must leave," Dumbledore said swiftly. "You must pretend as if no time has passed and they were merely knocked to the ground, do you understand Minerva?"

"Where will you go?" The transfiguration professor looked agitated and worried. Paladine felt the surge of relief and anger and turned to her Master, ignoring the conversation between the Headmaster and his Deputy Headmistress.

\$ Master? \$

\$ Hm? \$ He turned his gaze down and Paladine hissed her anger at the blankness in those emerald orbs. \$ Sorry Paladine, I missed that. \$

She probed their link and let the harsh cold fill her to the brim, accepting her Master's fury as easily as she accepted him when they first met. The anger was directed at Marietta, for putting him in this situation, the DA for being formed in the first place, the Headmaster for too many reasons to count and at his Head of House for following Dumbledore so blindly. She watched him with such worry and such care and it was so frustrating to see her look so fondly on the man when he had caused such strife in Harry's own life...

She abandoned any pretence at following the human's conversation at that point. Fawkes might have whistled something at her on a note that human ears couldn't pick up, but she was focussed on the emotions of her Master as revealed through their link.

This coldness was alive and aware of itself, to an extent. She curiously slipped beneath it to get a better feel for it. It was alive and stirring, like her own magic, but this was utterly...feral, in its intensity.

It stirred and coiled and roared and she regarded it with the same sort of scrutiny she would any threat.

This magic sensed her intentions and it calmed into a vast cool lake. It lapped gently at her mind, soothing and easy and humble before her, and she started. Her Master served. Served just as she served. Everything about his magic and his mind screamed for freedom but he wanted to serve. She was startled at the idea of her Master wanting so desperately for someone to serve as he had others serve him. He wanted the chance to give up his control – to place himself in the hands of another - and not have to worry because his power would only be called on for the right reasons. He wouldn't have to muddle through on his own, keep his own leash, calm the raging storm of magic inside him. Freedom in service.

But who was worthy of her Master's service? Paladine puzzled over that as she watched peripherally Fawkes take his friend, the Headmaster, away in a flash of fire. Certainly not the old fool who had just gone and certainly not his Head of House. The Minister, still prone on the floor, was also out. She poked at the cool magic again and it offered up a distinctly feminine feel as a response.

A female then. Perhaps the red-haired female, Ginny? Paladine shook her head. No, not that one. She was too young and her Master knew that the girl wasn't capable of defending herself and wielding his power and potential at the same time, even if he was able to defend both of them and attack at the same time.

The Minister stirred and Paladine shook her musings from her mind. She hissed darkly and leaned her full weight against her Master so that he rocked to the side. The Minister saw the motion, knowing that she meant no harm to her Master, and paled. Her strength could be turned against the Minister at any moment if he made a move against either of them.

Kingsley, the other Auror, and the toad-woman had taken off down the stairs in search of Dumbledore.

"Well, Minerva, I'm afraid this is the end of your friend, Dumbledore."

“Oh, you think so, do you?” she sneered. Harry blinked slowly and the hand he held near her head twitched. The Sapphire on his ring glowed mutely. Marietta sucked in a breath and glanced over. There was a blank smile on his face.

“Shall we go to bed now, Marietta? It’s beginning to get late.” Paladine heard the commanding undertone, and the fury contained within, just as well as Marietta did. She felt the disruption in the girl’s curse and made a low sound of approval at the already fading marks. “Minister. Professor.” His head dipped shortly to both of them as his hand found the small of Marietta’s back and firmly steered her from the room. “Good night.”

Paladine followed silently. There was nothing more to be done that night. They would deal with the repercussions in the morning.

TBC...

CHP35